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**Fourteen Years of Silence: An Exploration of Intimate Partner Violence in  
the Jewish Community**

A Thesis Submitted to the  
Yale University School of Medicine  
In Partial Fulfillment of the Requirements for the  
Degree of Doctor of Medicine

By  
Rachel Rose Light  
2006

FOURTEEN YEARS OF SILENCE: AN EXPLORATION OF INTIMATE PARTNER  
VIOLENCE IN THE JEWISH COMMUNITY.

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With the background that Jewish women stay in abusive marriages twice as long as their non-Jewish American counterparts, we attempt to understand the religious and cultural factors that may inhibit Jewish women from leaving violent relationships, and examine Scriptural and Rabbinic texts as to Jewish beliefs regarding spousal violence. A variety of academic sources and primary scriptural texts were analyzed for religious and cultural attitudes towards Jewish intimate partner violence. Eight Jewish victims of spousal abuse, five Rabbis and seventeen community support workers were interviewed. Jewish women face a variety of unique issues with regard to how domestic violence is experienced. Issues of communal shame, fear of anti-Semitism, learned accommodation, community disapproval, divorce law and other cultural and religious factors act as barriers to leaving. Biblical, Talmudic, and Rabbinic texts, however, speak clearly against marital violence and support a community effort toward victim support. There are thus conflicts between actual Jewish religious doctrine, and the interpretation of Jewish values amongst Jewish community members. There are social and cultural barriers to Jewish women leaving their abusive relationships, but an analysis of religious doctrine offers a source of strength for women to leave. The onus is on the Jewish community to effect change by breaking the silence and renouncing abuse.

**Acknowledgements**

I wish to thank all those who were interviewed as part of this thesis. I especially acknowledge the victims of domestic violence who so generously and courageously told their stories and spoke about their experiences to further my research. I thank my dedicated advisor, Linda Degutis, DrPH, for her tireless support and her wealth of insight. This research was supported by a summer research grant from the Yale School of Medicine Office of Student Research.

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## **Introduction**

The problem of intimate partner violence in the Jewish American community has been largely unexamined. Several studies suggest the prevalence in this community is the same as in the United States at large, and yet Jewish women may stay in their abusive relationships longer, perhaps even twice as long as other American women. No comprehensive study of Jewish culture and religion has been done to examine this phenomenon of longer endurance in violent partnerships. This study attempts to identify and explore the social, cultural, spiritual and scriptural aspects of Judaism which may contribute to this dichotomy in how women free themselves of abusive marriages. An exploration of these issues will hopefully lead to more culturally-sensitive, supportive services for Jewish American victims of spousal battering.

## **Background**

Intimate partner violence is the most common crime in the United States, and affects more than 4 million women each year (1). The National Center for Victims of Crime has defined intimate partner violence as a pattern of assault and coercive behaviors, including physical, sexual and psychological attacks and economic coercion that adults or adolescents use against their intimate partners (2). Intimate partner violence is the largest cause of injury to women, injuring more women between the ages of 15 and 44 than motor vehicle crashes, muggings, and cancer deaths combined. The family is, in fact, one of the most likely places where an individual may experience abuse (1). A woman is nine

times more likely to be attacked in her own home than on the streets (3).

**Comment:** is this the complete citation?

The National Crime Victimization Survey found that 85% of intimate partner violence victims were women (4). Because most victims are women, we will speak about victims as females and refer to batterers in the male gender.

Every fifteen seconds the Federal Bureau of Investigation (FBI) receives reports of a woman being beaten by her male intimate partner (5). About 30% of all women seeking treatment in hospital emergency departments are victims of

domestic violence, and are seeking treatment for injuries inflicted upon them by

**Comment:** Best not use the term "wife beating" as it does not cover all circumstances, and is really not considered to be the best way of defining IPV.

their partners (6). More than half of all women killed in the U.S. are killed by their male partner; every six hours a woman is killed by her husband or boyfriend (7). Intimate partner violence results in nearly 2 million injuries and 1,300 deaths nationwide every year (8). Each month more than 50,000 U.S. women seek restraining or protective orders (9).

There are many serious consequences of intimate partner violence. More than half of all homeless women are on the street because they are fleeing violent partners (10). Violence against women is associated with a host of serious health problems, including pelvic pain, headaches, back pain, broken bones, gynecological disorders, pregnancy difficulties like low birth weight babies and perinatal deaths, sexually transmitted diseases including HIV/AIDS, central nervous system disorders, gastrointestinal disorders, heart or circulatory disorders and mental health disorders (11, 12). Psychological consequences of intimate partner violence include depression, anxiety, somatization, post-traumatic stress disorder, low self esteem, fear of intimacy and vaginismus, and suicide (13).

Intimate partner violence constitutes a serious public health problem and is a major contributor to psychiatric symptomatology in women both in the developed and developing world (11).

Women with a history of intimate partner violence are also more likely to display behaviors that present future health risks, such as substance abuse, alcoholism and suicide attempts (14). Victimization is associated with engaging in high risk sexual behavior such as unprotected sex, decreased condom use, early sexual initiation, having multiple sex partners and trading sex for food or money. Female victims of intimate partner violence are more likely to smoke cigarettes, drink alcohol, drive under the influence and take illegal drugs. Unhealthy diet related behaviors, such as fasting, vomiting, abusing diet pills and laxatives and overeating are also associated with victims of battering (14).

Children are also victims of intimate partner violence. Seventy to eighty-four percent of batterers also abuse their children (15). In homes where intimate partner violence occurs, children are abused or seriously neglected at a rate 57 times greater than the national average (16). Nearly 40-50% of abusive husbands in the US and Canada batter their wives while they are pregnant, making them four times more likely to bear infants of low birth weight (17). Between 4% and 8% of pregnant women are abused at least once during their pregnancy (17).

Intimate partner violence has effects that are felt far beyond the home in which it is committed. Costs of intimate partner violence against women in 1995 exceed an estimated \$5.8 billion. These costs include nearly \$4.1 in the direct costs of medical and mental health care and nearly \$1.8 billion in the indirect

**Comment:** be sure to add the references for these.

costs of lost productivity (8). When updated to 2003 dollars, intimate partner violence costs exceed \$8.3 billion, which includes \$460 million for rape, \$6.2 billion for physical assault, \$461 million for stalking and \$1.2 billion in the value of lost lives (18). Victims of severe intimate partner violence lose nearly 8 million days of paid work – the equivalent of more than 32,000 full time jobs – and almost 5.6 million days of household productivity each year (8). Women who experience severe aggression by men (e.g., not being allowed to go to work or school, or having their lives or their children’s lives threatened) are more likely to be unemployed, have health problems, and be receiving public assistance (19, 20).

Although it is estimated that in the United States every year, three to four million women are beaten in their homes by their husbands, ex-husbands or male lovers, this number could be as large as ten million because for every case reported an estimated 10-20 cases go unreported. Approximately one-third, or 29%, of all women have experienced intimate partner violence at some point during their marriage (13). In 1990, the number of women abused by their husbands exceeded the number of women who got married (10).

Victims of intimate partner violence are of all ages, races, religions, ethnicities, cultures, sexual orientations, socioeconomic backgrounds, and geographical groups. They may be educated, non-educated, professionals or nonprofessionals. Many are successful career women (20).

Like rape, intimate partner violence is a crime that goes underreported. Data are difficult to obtain because the crime usually occurs at night, in the home,

and with no witnesses. Women are often isolated and silent when it comes to family violence, because there is a deeply-rooted sense of shame associated with this crime (21).

### Intimate Partner Violence in the Jewish Community

Judaism is the second largest religion in America after Christianity, with Jews estimated to number more than 6 million in the United States (22). Jews in America are a diverse group comprised of immigrants as well as American-born citizens, many of whom are second and third generation descendants of Holocaust survivors. Jews in America come from Eastern and Western Europe, Israel and elsewhere in the Middle East, the former Soviet Union, Mexico and South America, and Africa.

In the Jewish community few studies have been done to ascertain the prevalence of intimate partner violence but those that do exist show the numbers to be similar to the rates reported in non-Jewish homes. In 1998, Jewish Women International reported that 15 to 25 percent of all Jewish households experience violence (23).

A study conducted in 1980 in Los Angeles showed equal rates of violence among Orthodox, Conservative, Reform and Reconstructionist Jewish families, as demonstrated from 209 completed questionnaires (24). At the time, these were the four major sects of Judaism, and they still represent the overwhelming majority of Jews in America today. This study incorporated spousal abuse, child abuse and sibling violence and found that the high level of violence which exists

in the general population also occurs in the Jewish community, across the entire religious, socio-economic and cultural spectrum. The only distinction that could be made in studying a wide range of Jewish families was that those survey respondents in the study with higher incomes were more likely to be involved with intrafamilial violence. This 1983 study also documented that the phenomenon of family violence being transmitted from generation to generation described in general population studies is also present in Jewish families. High associations were found between violence committed by an individual and violence either done to or witnessed by that individual during his/her childhood (24).

Another form of transmission of violence comes from a history of violent oppression of Jews. The experience of pogroms in Europe, the immigrant experience in the early 1900's in America, and, most powerfully, the experience of survivors of the Holocaust and their descendants all serve to generate rage and model violent means of interaction which find expression within the family (24).

The Giller and Goldsmith study (24) was also interested in who women turned to for help. The vast majority reported talking to friends and family members; the next most frequently consulted group were private therapists. Only 4 out of 209 women reported speaking to a Rabbi. None of the respondents reported speaking to public agencies, including the police, thereby accounting for the near absence of Jews in official family violence statistics. Sixty two percent of those surveyed felt that family violence was a problem in the general community, but a shocking 61% believed that it was *not* a problem in the Jewish

community (24).

When thinking about intimate partner violence, it is important to examine not only prevalence, but also the process and speed at which a victim leaves her abusive relationship. One study (25) examined the processes by which women living in small town, island and rural environments leave and stay out of abusive relationships. The basic social psychological process for survivors leaving their batterers described in this study was “reclaiming self.” Reclaiming self consists of four stages: “counteracting abuse,” “breaking free,” “not going back,” and “moving on.” “Counteracting abuse” is a process of resistance that begins with the onset of partner abuse wherein victims relinquish parts of themselves, minimize the violence, and then later begin to fortify their defenses. “Breaking free” occurs when women actively disengage from the abuser and from their joint assets and lifestyle. “Not going back” is a process of sustaining separation from abusers by establishing and protecting personal space. Finally, “moving on” is a process of facing the past and grappling with the future.

The average length of time it takes a woman in this country to go through this process of leaving an abusive relationship is 3-5 years in some reports, 7 years in others (26). Landenburger (27) notes that women’s experiences of leaving are influenced by “the culture in which we live and the demands made on women through ascribed roles of behavior.” According to Merritt-Gray and Wuest (25), during the “counteracting abuse” phase, rural isolation and cultural values that emphasize an insular isolation and personal privacy contributed to participants’ propensity to remain silent about and to blame themselves for abuse.

Judaism, just as much a culture as a religion, emphasizes group-identification and orientation with loyalty to religious kins-people and family members. As any minority group living within a cultural and religious majority, Jews are community-based, inwardly focused and insular, with an underlying subconscious fear of the dominant culture, both in terms of ostracism and rejection. We therefore would expect Jews to fit the proposed model of group-oriented cultures with a propensity for silence about spousal abuse.

According to several different Jewish intimate partner violence organization professionals, Jewish women stay in abusive relationships five to seven years longer than non-Jews (28, 29). Kuperstein (30) found that Jewish women stay an average of 8-10 years, while non-Jewish women stay 3-5 years after the battering begins. According to the Jewish Board of Family and Children's Services, Jewish women stay in marriages twice as long as non-Jewish women, on average 14 years rather than seven years from the time the violence begins (31). The statistic, 14 years, seems to have become the more widely accepted number and has been quoted often by authors, Rabbis, and professionals in the field (32, 33, 34, 35, 28, 29, 36, 37). With regard to prevalence, while all studies suggest that the rates of spousal abuse are the same amongst Jews and non-Jews, the types of abuse may not be consistent throughout all peoples in this country. Rabbi Abraham Twerski says that there may be less physical abuse in the Orthodox world than there is outside of it, but emotional abuse is the same or higher (34). Financial abuse, when the husband withholds all money from his wife, is particularly prevalent in abusive Orthodox homes, more so than in secular

homes, according to the Jewish Board of Family and Children's Services (31).

### Myths

There are many myths associated with the problem of intimate partner abuse. Intimate partner violence is often dismissed as rare, only affecting a small group of unfortunate women. Statistics show that not only is this crime not rare, it is so widespread as to be called an epidemic. As long as our society continues to underestimate the problem, it will be very hard to respond with legislation, and support systems for the abused.

Another myth is that middle and upper class women are not battered, and that religious Jewish men are not batterers. According to researchers, family violence affects all people of all backgrounds, blind to class, race, religion, and ethnicity. While most studies about intimate partner violence have been conducted in lower class families, this is because women in lower socioeconomic groups are more likely to be in regular contact with government workers such as social workers or welfare workers so their bruises are more easily detected (21). Also these families tend to live in more densely populated areas where their screams are more readily overheard (21). Interestingly, there have been studies which find that spousal abuse might actually be more prevalent in families of higher socioeconomic background. In a study conducted in Los Angeles Jewish communities comparing intimate partner violence on the basis of religious affiliation, the only variable that was found to be significant for higher incidence of spousal violence was higher income, mobility and level of education of the

family members (24). This contradicts virtually every communal expectation and myth, which characterizes men who abuse as brutish, unrefined and uneducated.

Victims of violence in general are often invisible when they do not fit in with popular stereotypes. Intimate partner violence workers, doctors, Rabbis, and lay people may possess “blindspots” and run the risk of not recognizing intimate partner violence when it affects women who are not of color, are not of lower socioeconomic means, and who might be educated, professionals, and in fact Jewish (38). This myth runs true for the abusers as well. Scholars, doctors, lawyers, and “piously” observant Jews may too be violent and sexually abusive.

Another myth is that abuse is caused by alcoholism or substance abuse. Although chemical dependency may indeed exacerbate abuse, a causal link between substance abuse and woman battering has not been demonstrated by research (39). Although one study shows that alcohol use by the perpetrator is associated with an eight-fold increase in partner abuse and a two-fold increase in attempted femicide (40), alcohol abuse may be correlative rather than causative. Women have reported, in fact, that when chemical use is discontinued, the intimate partner abuse often continues and intensifies (39). Women also report that their spouses and boyfriends more often use chemicals *after* the abuse as a way for the perpetrator to medicate his shame and guilt, not *before* the abusive episode. Therefore it does not appear to be causative although there may be a correlation between substance using behavior and an abusing personality (39).

Blaming abuse on mental illness or loss of control is also not founded. In fact, an extremely small percentage of batterers are mentally ill (41). Experience

shows that intimate partner violence is often well controlled and that the man is deliberate in his actions, and that the abuse does not stem merely from irrational impulses. Accordingly, an abuser may carefully hit under the hair line where the bruise will not show, or specifically on the face so that it will show. An abusive man tends to be consistent in whether he chooses to “show” his mark or “hide” it (39). Furthermore, batterers tend to only abuse their family members, and only in private. This is, therefore, not a case of momentary loss of control. In fact many abusers even plan their next assault. Thus battering is a behavioral choice.

Many believe that intimate partner violence is usually a one-time event, or an isolated incident. In actuality, battering is a pattern, and once violence begins in a relationship it gets worse and more frequent over time. Tactics include intimidation, threats, psychological abuse and eventually physical abuse. Experts have compared the process batterers use to intensify the abuse to the methods used by terrorists to brainwash hostages (41).

The general public and the women themselves often believe the myth that the women provoke the men and are responsible for pushing the abuser past his breaking point. This can lead to the assumption that men need not accept responsibility for their actions. The idea several interviewed victims believed, that “it takes two to tango,” and that both parties are responsible for the abuse perpetrated, can be misleading. Many women who are battered make numerous attempts to change their own behavior in the hope that this will stop the abuse. This does not work. Blaming the victim is a common practice that compounds the abuse and causes physical and emotional pain.

Another myth is that women stay in abusive relationships because they like being beaten and abused. Studies clearly contradict this point by demonstrating that women do not choose one battering relationship after another, contrary to popular belief (42).

### So... Why Do Women Stay?

In fact, women do not leave their abusers for several reasons. One is ironically for their safety. Women may receive little support from the law enforcement system, which is often ineffective at protecting them when they are attempting to leave an abusive relationship. In Washington DC in 1990, an abusive spouse was arrested in less than 15% of the cases in which a victim was bleeding from open wounds (10). Going to the police in many cases also makes the situation at home much worse. The police are often reluctant to respond to intimate partner assaults and may take an hour or more to show up to the troubled house, and sometimes do not show up at all. When they do appear, their solution is often to cause the couple to separate temporarily, by telling one partner to leave for the night. This just leaves the woman vulnerable to further violence when she and her spouse are together and alone again the following day. She may be punished for involving the police the previous day. The criminal justice system also offers little protection to the battered woman. Orders of protection can be issued but are often ineffective. In addition, women who leave an abusive house for their own safety are often considered to have “abandoned” their children and therefore may lose custody of them. Women who refuse to testify in criminal

**Comment:** Some systems are actually quite supportive, and have officers who spend all of their time on IPV.

court against their batterers, for fear of the repercussions, may be considered hostile witnesses and may have their cases thrown out. Women caught in situations such as these also face losing the material property to which they are entitled, and many walk away with much less than half of the couple's assets, sometimes with virtually nothing. |

**Comment:** I think it is important to look at more recent data on IPV and criminal justice, as many things have changed since 1990. It would be helpful to look at some of Jacqueline Campbell's work, as well.

Many people wonder why women stay in a dangerous situation, but unfortunately many of them know if they try to leave they may be killed. Women who leave have a 75% greater risk of being killed by their batterer than those who stay living with him. If a woman does get custody of her children, studies have shown that batterers will often use child visitation and custody as a means to gain access to ex-wives and continue to abuse, harass, or batter them (9). The courts will sometimes allow such a shared custody situation to exist even though it may clearly put the woman in danger. As a result women seeking legal separation or divorce may face the greatest risk of personal injury, both physical and economic (9).

Some women stay in abusive relationships because they want to preserve the family. They see their role in maintaining the family as wife, mother and homemaker. Leaving the situation is an admission of failure for these women. They also face the real possibility of losing custody of their children. If they leave the home, judges may rule that the woman "abandoned" her children. In many states judges are not required to consider proof of intimate partner violence in custody disputes (43). A woman will often lose custody of her children in such cases of "abandonment." An abusive husband can even use the abuse as a means

to remove the children from their mother. He can argue that the woman “endangered” her children by staying married to him, and therefore she is incompetent.

Women may also stay because they are financially dependent on their partners. In one survey, more than fifty percent of battered women stayed with their abuser because they did not feel they could support themselves and their children. This is not an incorrect assumption. In the first year after divorce, a woman’s standard of living drops by an average of 73 percent while a man’s improves by an average of 42 percent. (43) This may seem like a more likely reason in families of lower socioeconomic background; yet more often this reason is given by women in higher social classes because they are afraid they will not be able to maintain their, and their children’s, standard of living. It seems that the “higher” one starts, the further one has to “fall.”

In addition to financial dependence, many women are emotionally dependent on their spouses. They may learn helplessness, lack self-esteem, and feel that they deserve abuse. They feel conflicted feelings of love, loyalty, guilt, responsibility, and fear of being alone. These women may not have the self-assurance or practical skills necessary to live apart from their partners. Abused women may be confused by mixed messages of love and violence. The cycle of abuse is a flip-flop of violence and remorse, torture and affection. These polar opposites can leave a woman feeling torn between love and hate, desire to stay during the good times, and desire to leave in the bad times.

Whether or not to leave may also be a matter of the women identifying

themselves as abused. Many women who are emotionally, but not physically, assaulted may have a hard time calling their husbands' behavior "abuse." When we are exposed to "abuse" in our society, it is often via the media announcing the beating of a woman by her spouse or boyfriend, or in the movies where we see drunken men slapping and punching their wives. In studies when women were asked to identify victims of abuse, they almost universally identified women with visible black and blue bruises and scars. There is little exposure to and awareness of other forms of abuse, equally debilitating, and therefore it may be hard to label it abuse. Many of the abuse survivors who when interviewed for this study cited their lack of awareness that the abuse they suffered was in fact abuse. Many stayed until the abuse became physical and only then were able to identify themselves as victims and leave.

Can batterers change? Men often express guilt after a beating and promise it will never happen again. Most often the assaults continue. The leader of a well-known therapeutic program for abusive men in Pennsylvania reported that only ten percent of the men coming to his group become "abuse-free" and remain so over the course of a year (44). This support group is made up of about forty percent voluntary members who enroll freely in order to change, and sixty percent members mandated to attend the program by court order. The men's group leader also maintains that even if a year, or twenty years, pass without an abusive episode, an abusive man is always an abusive man and must always view himself accordingly. He therefore must live the rest of his life with great care, introspection, and consternation. His mantra was, "Once an abuser, always an

abuser. Changed behavior does not mean a changed man.” He had seen countless men revert to previous battering patterns even after ten years of refraining.

Especially in close-knit, homogeneous communities that tend to stick to themselves, abuse will not end until awareness and education increase within that community. Significant barriers to the victim staying away from her batterer after leaving him had to do with service providers’ ignorance. A woman’s adaptation to her new environment, after terminating her relationship, is aided by a social support network, as well as well-informed legal, economic, mental health/emotional, educational, and social service providers. When service providers are uneducated about abuse, unsympathetic, or simply bearers of bad advice, the woman is more likely to return to her partner (39). Culturally sensitive resources as well as educational and support programs available within each such community would better serve the needs of its people.

#### Jewish BATTERERS

Bob Gluck runs a counseling service for men who abuse their partners and a portion of his clients over the years have been Jewish. He describes commonalities that he finds in the Jewish batterer. These are men who tend to be sensitive to feeling hurt, especially when they offer to help others and feel rebuffed. They are typically unassertive, intimidating and controlling, though they feel powerless. They have low self esteem and are easily frustrated, humiliated and hurt. These Jewish abusers have trouble identifying or articulating their feelings and identify all uncomfortable emotions as “anger.” When they are

not raging they often feel depressed. A poor ability to communicate and resolve conflict characterizes many Jewish abusers. Many of them experienced an early wound to their sense of self, coupled with role models of men who utilize instrumental violence. The Jewish abuser is often a loner except for his partner and is therefore dependent on her. He may feel shame about his behavior but believes himself to be powerless to stop it. It is early role modeling of violence and a lower threshold for emotional pain tolerance that couple to produce his violent behavior. He may also have a personal history of assaults on his gender identity, such as being called a wimp, sissy or mama's boy. As a result he may feel anger or bitterness and possibly he may experience a gender role conflict. Should he be the tough, worldly, ruthless go-getter, or the exalted mensch (gentle and kindhearted person)? As a Jewish boy he probably experienced this conflict in the form of questions. Should he involve himself in music and art, as his Jewish mother might prefer, or play sports? Role conflicts do not end in adolescence. As a man, how can he balance the expectation of being a caring husband, sharing in chores and child rearing, with the demand of meeting a high work and study achievement level? These conflicts lead to personal identity confusion. Gluck states that Jewish men may also possess gender stereotypes and negative attitudes towards women. They may perceive women as bossy, tough and aggressive. The assertiveness of Jewish women may be threatening to their masculinity. Barriers to change cited by Gluck include men's denial, minimization of abuse, and externalization of negative feelings onto others (45).

**Statement of Purpose and Hypothesis**

The purpose of this thesis is to examine the cultural, religious, social and scriptural aspects of Judaism that impact the length of time a Jewish woman stays in relationship with her abusive partner. The hypothesis is that there are unique components of the Jewish victim's experience of intimate partner violence, and specific cultural and religious factors that promote Jewish women to endure their violent marriages longer than the average American woman. By examining these factors, culturally sensitive service providers and support systems can be developed, which will better serve the needs of Jewish families. An examination of intimate partner violence among Jewish Americans may also help shed light on other unstudied and underserved cultural and religious groups in this country.

## **Methods**

This was a prospective, exploratory study using a qualitative analytic approach. Data were obtained through review of literature and interviews of key informants.

### Literature Review

A variety of primary and secondary sources were examined closely. The Torah, or Jewish Bible, was examined in its authentic form, in the original Hebrew language. It was scanned in its entirety looking for anything related to the husband-wife relationship, spousal abuse, marriage and divorce. Talmudic texts and Rabbinic texts were extensively searched and examined in their original languages, in English, Hebrew or Aramaic. These texts were found either as referenced in some of the secondary sources or by directly examining specific areas of the Talmud devoted to Jewish family law.

Secondary sources were obtained with the help of Medline, Orbis and PsycINFO searches. Multiple search strategies were constructed. The search terms used for these three databases included:

1. domestic violence or intimate partner violence or spouse abuse or spousal abuse.
2. religion or Judaism or Jewish
3. Moslem or Muslim or Islam
4. criminal justice
5. marriage
6. divorce
7. abuse or rape or violence

All search terms were combined in various permutations with “and.”

References were also found by examining literature cited sections of the books and articles found from the search method described above. Several sources were also found at the recommendation of Rabbis and social workers well versed in the literature. A bibliography on Jewish domestic violence written by Marcia Cohn Spiegel, published in 2002, was also used for the purpose of finding sources (46).

### Lectures and Interviews

I attended several lectures by Rabbis and community leaders about Jewish intimate partner violence. I also attended a two-day conference devoted entirely to Jewish intimate partner violence, run by Jewish Women International and held in Baltimore, MD in July 2003. I also attended a domestic violence symposium at Yale School of Medicine in March 2003 which offered a variety of lectures about various aspects of the topic.

A variety of people were interviewed as part of this research, such as men’s group leaders, victim support group leaders, victims and survivors, and Rabbis and community leaders. The interview portion of this study was approved by the Human Investigation Committee at Yale University School of Medicine, HIC # 25259. Many of the victims and survivors were recruited for this research at the JWI conference in July 2003 by flyers that I handed out which described my research. Interested women were instructed on how to contact me and were interviewed over the telephone or in person. Other interviewees approached me in other settings based on referral from others who knew of my work.

A total of 8 women who were present or past victims of intimate partner violence were interviewed. 5 were recruited at the conference and 3 were referred to me by other sources. Interviews with women consisted of open ended questions that started with the question, "Can you tell me your story?" Follow up questions related to reasons the women left their abusers and/or barriers to leaving. Other questions asked the interviewees to relate their experiences to their Jewish culture, values and beliefs. The goal of the interviews was to shed light on the relationship between the woman's experience of abuse and her identification with Judaism. 3 were interviewed in person and 5 were interviewed by phone.

A total of 5 Rabbis were interviewed, self identified as 3 Orthodox, 1 Conservative and 1 Reform. One was interviewed in person and 4 were interviewed by phone.

A variety of other people were interviewed for this research, including social workers, men's and women's support group leaders, workers at shelters, hotlines and other service organizations, a lawyer, and a mikvah (ritual bath) attendant. A total of 17 people in this broad category were interviewed, 3 in person and 14 by phone.

### Data Analysis

This is a qualitative study. Articles and books were analyzed for what they revealed about the Jewish experience of abuse. These sources provided some data and statistics as well as discussion of the issues surrounding this topic. Scriptural sources, the Torah and Talmud, as well as Rabbinic writings, were examined to uncover the Jewish stance on marital violence and the Jewish attitude towards marriage, power in

relationships, marital sex and divorce. Notes from interviews of a total of 30 interviewees were analyzed for common themes expressed related to the Jewish experience of intimate partner violence. Barriers to leaving abusive relationships were divided into the categories of Jewish values, Jewish laws and Jewish culture.

## **Results**

The following is a discussion the ways in which aspects of Jewish culture and religion can be barriers for women to leave their abusive marriages. Some of the following will be direct laws and ethics from Jewish dogma while others are common misinterpretations and misconceptions of Jewish mores. Other barriers will be related to Jewish culture and history. Following this discussion is a discourse on the Scriptural, or actual, Jewish stance on abuse and Jewish attitudes towards marriage, power in relationships, marital sex and divorce.

### Barriers to Leaving in the Jewish Community

The following is a discussion of Jewish traditions and tenets that are often cited by women themselves, or their Rabbis, friends and family, to encourage them to stay in abusive relationships. Often it is the misinterpretation and misuse of Jewish values and traditions that lead to women feeling trapped in their violent relationships. Misinterpretation of Jewish values can contribute substantially to victims' guilt, self-blame and suffering and to the rationalizations often used by those who abuse (47). In preparing this section I included those Jewish values, acting as barriers to leaving, that were repeatedly mentioned by the different interviewees. Many of these barriers to leaving were also discussed in the literature. Other barriers included are actual laws that interfere with a woman leaving her abuser. Finally Jewish cultural, social and historical factors are examined as barriers to leaving violent marriages. Many of these were alluded to by interviewees although these features of Jewish community affiliation are more

clearly elucidated by the literature. Hebrew or Yiddish terminology is defined for the reader's benefit (table 1).

Table 1: A List of Relevant Jewish Terms and Their Definitions

Jewish Terms (In the Order that They Appear Below)	Definitions
Rabbi	Jewish spiritual leader
Torah	The Jewish Bible – both Old Testament and New Testament
Shalom Bayit	Peace and tranquility within the home
Bet Din/ Batei Din	Jewish court/ plural
Mitzvah	Good deed or commandment
Bashert	Destined or intended, usually referring to one's predestined mate
Talmud	The major compendium of discussions on Jewish legal texts; composed of the mishna (a law book compiled by topic, circa 220 C.E.) and the gemara (discussions of the mishna, circa 500 C.E.)
Teshuva	Repentance
Kosher	Adherent to the strict dietary laws
Shabbos/ Shomer Shabbat	The Jewish Sabbath/ One who strictly observes all the Sabbath restrictions
Agunah/ Agunot	A chained woman rendered so because her husband refuses to give her a divorce. She lives "chained" to him, unable to divorce or remarry/ plural
Halachah	Jewish law
Shidduch	An arranged marriage, or an introduction for purposes of dating and marriage
Shanda	Shame
Lashon Hara	Evil speech, slander, anything spoken negatively about another person
Chilul Hashem	A desecration of G-d's name

Pikuach Nefesh	A principle that allows one to break a commandment for the sake of saving a life
Shulchan Aruch	Composed by Joseph Caro and first published in 1565. This work is the major authority for Jewish law and practice throughout the Jewish world. It contains concise rulings on all areas of Jewish tradition.
Ketubah	Jewish marriage license
Hashkafah	Jewish worldview
Mikvah	A body of water in which women immerse each month following menstruation
Get/Gitin	Jewish divorce document/ plural
Momzer	Bastard – child born from parents forbidden to one another – often a child born to adulterous parents. This bastard is not allowed to marry a Jew, nor can his children marry Jews.

#### Jewish Values That Act as Barriers to Leaving

The Jewish concept of shalom bayit, peace within the home, can be described as both spiritually uplifting and potentially misleading. Shalom bayit is the idea that creating peace and sanctity in the home is a holy pursuit and one of the greatest of all mitzvot (commandments). Women are taught that this is a large part of their jobs as wife and mother, that the level of peace and beauty in their homes can be credited, in large part, to their hard work. Couples are blessed by friends, relatives, and spiritual leaders when they get married that they should build a truthful and peaceful home together. Rabbis counsel couples that this is the greatest of all pursuits. In fact, marriage itself, in Hebrew, is called “kiddushin” or holiness. This demonstrates the high level of expectation and responsibility placed on the married couple, as their union is something holy in

and of itself. Therefore the sanctity of family and of the marital relationship is greatly stressed. The idea of building peace, even when sacrifices and compromises must be made, is a strong part of the Jewish view on marriage. If a couple wants to get a divorce, the Rabbi or Bet Din (court) will often try to convince the couple to keep pursuing shalom bayit and to work harder to make the marriage work.

In theory this concept builds and enhances Jewish marriages and serves families in a positive way. Many will attribute the lower divorce rate in Jewish families, as compared to non-Jewish, as being due to this ethic of hard work and unequivocal peace (48). However this concept can also lead to the silence and powerlessness of women. Violation of shalom bayit carries such stigma that this idealized concept itself contributes to the massive denial within the Jewish community of the existence of intimate partner violence. Women who are abused will convince themselves that the abuse is their fault, that they are falling short on the task of preserving shalom bayit. A woman may feel it is her duty to stay in a failing relationship because of the tremendous mitzvah, commandment, of creating a peaceful union. While other women who are battered may feel entitled to leave a marriage (why should I put up with this?), observant Jews may feel it is their job to make this marriage work, perhaps even their struggle to overcome, or their challenge.

Shalom bayit was originally meant to be an ideal to strive for, not a standard, or a reality to be taken for granted, as some mistakenly view it today. Rabbis put into place many laws and taught many concepts of how to love one's

wife and how to treat her, so as to help the family achieve this goal. Shalom bayit is something to seek, not an absolute truth just by virtue of two spouses being Jewish. The practical achievement of peace in the home requires enormous effort, mutual and self-respect, patience, cooperation, compromise, understanding, and forgiveness. The ideal was designed by Rabbis as an inspiration and focal point for Jewish marriage, but the concept became distorted over time to be seen as an automatic achievement rather than a process requiring hard work. Thus wishful and naïve thinking, with the hope that Jews will live up to the ideal just because they are supposed to, creates faulty expectations and may contribute to the myth that Jewish intimate partner violence does not exist (39). Furthermore, shalom bayit is indeed a sacred concept but it is the responsibility of both husband and wife to see it is achieved. Many have come to see it today as somehow being part of the “woman’s domain.” It is a mistake to see the entire responsibility for shalom bayit as resting on the wife’s shoulders, and if one looks in the Talmud it is quite notable that most of the Rabbis’ directives about creating peace in the home, that are described later in this book, are spoken directly to the *man* of the marriage.

A woman may be further encouraged to stay in an abusive marriage because of the concept of bashert, one’s predestined mate. This mystical idea proposes that prior to one’s birth, the name of one’s bashert is announced, in effect a match made in heaven. One spends one’s life searching for his/her perfect mate, the missing puzzle piece that will fit into one’s unwhole soul to make it complete. Marriage for Orthodox couples is, therefore, the medium and

means for individual fulfillment and aloneness is equated with incompleteness (49). This thought is one that brides and grooms cherish as they think of their souls finally being united after years of yearning. The pitfall, however, is that a woman may feel it is her lot to be married to her abusive husband, that for some reason she cannot understand this was predestined, and that it is her job to make the relationship successful. Many women might derive strength to endure the abuse from this concept, knowing that they are struggling for the sake of heaven and at the hands of their bashert, knowing that by sticking it out and working harder they can eventually achieve peace. G-d would not have made a match in heaven that could not succeed; if it is not working it is just further cause to keep trying. A woman can be stuck a whole lifetime in such a situation, refusing to acknowledge that perhaps this never was her bashert to begin with.

Moreover, marriage is considered one of life's greatest blessings. The Talmud states, "Whoever finds a wife finds great good and finds favor with G-d" and "It is better for one to live in an unhappy married state than to live a happy life in solitude" (50, 51). This line is often recited by Rabbis and family members when an abused woman comes to them seeking help. The assumption that any marriage is better than no marriage at all arises from a superficial view of marriage that is concerned with appearances only and not with substance. In light of many other sources quoted later, it is obvious that the Talmud does not mean that it is better to stay in an abusive marriage than to leave. Clearly divorce is very much allowed in Judaism and would be well applied in a case of abuse. Rabbis, laymen, and particularly women must recognize that this statement was

not referring to marriages fraught with fear, horror, devastation, and destruction.

The concept of teshuva, sincere remorse that leads to forgiveness, is also a tremendously powerful and potentially misleading component of Jewish relationships. Jews are taught that they can atone and be forgiven by G-d for any sin they have committed against Him, through a series of stages. According to the Rambam, Maimonides, they must regret their sin, feel remorse, confess it out loud, ask forgiveness and commit not to do it again, and prove their commitment by being in a similar situation in the future and not making the same mistake (52). If these stages are passed successfully, the Jew is taught that he/she has received forgiveness from G-d and has, so to speak, wiped his/her slate clean.

On the level of transgressions that occur between people, there is also the concept of teshuva. The injured party is encouraged to forgive the transgressor, especially if asked several times. The person who has wronged his/her neighbor is encouraged to feel regret and remorse, to confess his/her sin to the injured party, and to ask forgiveness, even if it takes a few times. An abusive man, especially if he is religious, will often seek forgiveness from his victim and will go to the extreme to confess his wrongdoings and promise to change. From the perspective of teshuva, the victim may feel obligated to accept the apology and offer forgiveness. After all, if G-d is eternally forgiving should we not learn from this quality and try to personify it? Rabbis, if they are involved, will often support this, teaching the victim and batterer that sincere remorse eradicates even the gravest of sins, and thereby encouraging the couple to forgive and move on. Unfortunately when the abuser is in a similar situation in the future to the one that

originally set him off, he will most likely not be able to resist his anger and will almost certainly abuse in a similar or worse manner. Forgiveness by the victim is possible only when there is repentance on the part of the abuser, and real repentance means a change in the abuser's behavior. Victims also will move to forgive at their own pace and cannot be pushed by others' expectations of them. It may take years before they are ready to forgive and their timing must be respected (47).

Importantly, women, especially in the Orthodox community, may feel that disclosure of spousal abuse and/or sexual abuse is a violation of the prohibition against *lashon hara*, speaking badly about another person. *Lashon hara* (53) refers to the biblical injunction against harming another person's reputation by talebearing. Rabbis have outlined this prohibition as referring even to cases where the "tale" is true. Many Jewish women cited as a reason they did not disclose their victimization, the fear that they would damage their husband's reputation in the Jewish community (24). Furthermore, women may feel disclosure is a case of *chilul hashem* (54), which prohibits the adjudication of Jews in non-Jewish courts. Rabbi Mark Dratch (55), however, uses biblical sources to dispute that these traditions prevent disclosures of abuse. He instead proposes that spouse abusers are considered *rashaim* (wicked men) and therefore these laws do not apply. In addition, taking a wife beater to non-Jewish court, to get an order of protection for example, because it is for the woman's protection it is deemed *pikuach nefesh* (saving a life) and is therefore not only permissible but advisable when appropriate. Rabbi Dratch also suggests that in some cases it is a

mitzvah (good deed, commandment) to report such abusers, mentioning specifically child abusers, to civil authorities (55).

The family unit is stressed throughout Jewish hashkafah (worldview) and halachah (law). In the Jewish household each spouse has a unique job, symbolizing the importance of both partners in the relationship. The husband may make kiddush (sanctifying the wine) on Shabbat while the wife lights the Shabbat candles. Such laws and traditions serve to create a family unit in which every member has an essential role. Jewish concepts of parenting follow a similar thought. It is taught that each parent provides a unique style that helps the child grow. Traditionally the woman is seen as the caregiver and the man as the authority figure. With the combination of two different, but equal, parents there is both love and discipline, fun and responsibility for the children. Women who come from religious backgrounds will often feel that their children need their fathers and that the most important priority is to preserve the family unit. Furthermore, women used to viewing their role as emotional caretaker may become immobilized in the face of violence in their own families, which can lead to an overwhelming sense of guilt, responsibility and failure. The ensuing feeling of shame leads to isolation that further prevents the admission of problems in the home. While a wholesome marriage is ideal for a child's emotional wellbeing, it should also be realized that there may be serious psychological damage to children who witness their parents' abusive relationship. In abusive homes, divorce is not breaking up families. Violence and abuse are breaking up families. While divorce is never easy, it is, in the case of family violence, the lesser evil

(47).

The woman may feel like a failure as a Jewish woman when her family is falling apart. A misapplication of the proud legacy of the Jewish “woman of valor” may have created mythic expectations, causing the woman to hold herself solely responsible for all aspects of family life. She believes she must not only be the cornerstone of the home but indeed the very foundation on which it stands. Because family trouble is experienced as personal failure it may be hard to admit its existence (39).

#### Jewish Law That Acts as a Barrier to Leaving

Women may also worry about their husbands not giving them a get, or divorce document. There is an extensive discussion of agunot, or chained women, later in this section. It is very much a real fear and danger in Jewish marriages. Abusive husbands will sometimes not stop at anything in their attempts at destroying their wives’ lives. Many abusive men are of the attitude that “if I can’t have her, no one can.” They use halacha (Jewish law) as a means toward further abuse, by perverting the law and using it to hurt their wives. By refusing to give their victims divorces, the women essentially are bound to their husbands forever, unable to get remarried in a Jewish court or to bear children who would be considered part of the Jewish community. Women may choose to live in their horrible marriages, seeking to avoid trouble and simply endure, rather than to be in a position where they are separated from their husbands but sealed off from all other men. Furthermore this gives men a huge amount of power over

their wives, as they can keep their wives at their mercy, including blackmailing them for property and custody rights, and women may choose not to hand over their lives in this way to their abusers.

#### Cultural and Social Factors That Act as Barriers to Leaving

There are other factors that are often present in observant Jewish relationships that encourage the abused woman to stay in her marriage. Firstly, she and her children are often totally or largely dependent on her husband's income. While this is changing over time and more and more women are earning money, in observant communities the majority of women still are not employed outside the home. The unemployed woman may worry about how to support her children if she leaves her husband. He may even use this tactic as a reason why she cannot leave him. She may feel staying with him is the only thing she can do as a responsible mother. Even if a court mandates her husband give her a certain sum of money, there are many fathers that do not provide such support.

The abused wife may worry where she, and her children, if she has any, will go. She is living in a furnished home with all her belongings in it. Even if she is lucky enough to have a shelter in her area, this is not a permanent option. And if there is not a kosher, shomer Shabbat (Sabbath observant) shelter near her, she almost certainly would not feel comfortable in a secular shelter and would most likely not bring her children to such a place.

Furthermore, the community in which she lives may not look favorably upon a woman who leaves her husband. This is true for many religious Jewish

neighborhoods. Many communities would look down on such a woman for being a deserter, for depriving her children of a father (9). Many community members would not believe her that abuse exists in her marriage because of the pervasive denial and especially if her husband happens to be a popular, religious member of the synagogue (37). One woman survivor said, “The contradiction of his being an observant Jew and treating his family like that was just brutal” (56). She felt like she was forced into silence because his “pious” behavior masked the truth too well. No one, she said, would have believed her. She felt his religious observance was purposeful in order to maintain a wall of protection around himself within his community.

Some Rabbis are accessories to abuse because they choose not to hear about family violence in the homes of their congregants. Naomi Levy, writing an article on the Family Violence Project in Los Angeles notes, “One rabbi I spoke with recently asserted ‘I have been the rabbi of this community for over 30 years, and I’ve never encountered one incident of spouse abuse.’ Sadly, three of his congregants are clients of the Family Violence Project.” (57). There are many women who have gone to their rabbis, only to be told to work harder not to say things that upset their husbands, have dinner ready when their husbands get home, or to pay more attention to their physical appearances – all to keep their husbands happy and free from anger. Many women have fled to their parents’ homes, only to be told to return to their husbands and preserve the family unit. These unknowledgeable parents are often sending their own daughters to their doom (34).

In the Orthodox community marriage is sometimes initiated by a shidduch (matchmaking). In such a case a young man or woman from a home in which there was known to be abuse may not be considered favorably for a shidduch. Even if the marriage is not initiated by a shidduch, parents may have a significant role in choosing or approving of their child's choice of spouse. Knowledge of significant discord within the home may stigmatize the children and prevent parents from acquiescing to a match between their child and the child from an abusive home, or one with parents who have separated. Therefore, mothers will often stay with their abusive husbands for the sake of their children's future. Keeping silent can protect their children from the problems associated with being known to be from a troubled home. It is also important to note that husbands are often aware of this attitude and can derive power from this knowledge, knowing their wives will not leave them no matter what.

In the eyes of many Jewish women, to break the myth of Jewish homes being harmonious and peaceful would be to bring a "shanda" (shame) on the community. There is a widespread belief in this country that Jewish men are passive, loving and incapable of hostility and brutality. By admitting to violence, abused women call attention to their community and shatter the image that many have worked hard to maintain. The admission of violence may cause a backlash of resentment and disbelief by the community. In close-knit communities where both spouses are well-known, this may lead to the community placing the blame for the violence on the abused woman. Women have been ostracized in some cases for coming forward. Furthermore, because of this widespread belief of the

peacefulness of Jewish men, a woman can reason that the abuse is her fault because intimate partner violence “doesn’t happen to Jews” (43).

The Shanda is particularly important because of an ever-present fear of anti-Semitism. Riskin (58) states, “I believe that most Jews, even the most assimilated, walk around with a subliminal fear of anti-Semitism.” Jews may be averse to displaying their “dirty laundry” in public, as they know all too well how the Gentile world uses their misfortunes against them (1). Jews will often hide internal problems, drug abuse, violence, etc., lest they give anti-Semites “justification” for their unjustifiable acts (39). Jews often feel the need to assert and prove that they are better than others, and may feel that the community at large holds them to higher standards, and is quick to point fingers at Jewish problems when they indeed surface. By telling the truth, the women feel they are validating anti-Semitism. This can further cause Jewish women to forgo seeking help, as they would not be comfortable sharing their “shame” with non-Jewish therapists or other helping professionals (1). Yet the reality is, no abused woman can ever be “good enough” to stop her abuser, nor can the Jewish community ever be “perfect” enough to ward off rank anti-Semitism (39).

Jewish women operate under an additional set of stereotypes. Jewish women in the media have been portrayed as extremely powerful within the home, controlling, verbally domineering, and provoking otherwise docile men to lash out. They are stereotyped as bossy, tough and aggressive, able to handle any challenge; Jewish men are the ones traditionally and popularly perceived as the victims in gender relations (45). Jewish women are also popularly portrayed as

“Jewish American Princesses,” materialistic, dependent, manipulative and entitled, reinforcing anti-Semitic stereotypes about money, class and power, and further giving reason for men to “lose their patience” with their “demanding” wives. Operating in a culture fraught with these stereotypes can paralyze women and prevent them from seeking help, or from obtaining help when it is sought. This is because many therapists, social service agency workers, and even Rabbis may be functioning with the notion of the Jewish woman as the powerful, controlling victimizer and her husband as the passive, dominated victim.

This feeds into the Jewish mother stereotype. She is a constant overfeeder, and is overbearing in her unremitting solicitude about every aspect of her children’s and husband’s welfare (59). This stereotype conveys scorn and contempt for Jewish women. Jewish men demean their mothers, perhaps feeling infantilized or emasculated by them (60).

These stereotypes go hand in hand with the myth that Jewish men do not perpetrate intimate partner violence. This is in fact an internalization 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. Of course this accusation fails to take into account the complex realities of Jewish history, including faith and resistance to oppression. An important problem relevant here is that it equates the basis of intimate partner violence with aggression and not with the desire for control, which is what it really is. This popular image of the Jewish man as being all intellect but no physical prowess may indeed play a part in the failure to see Jewish intimate

partner abuse where it exists, and may further reinforce the abuser's false perception of his helplessness and powerlessness, thereby encouraging him to "take control" where he can – at home (39).

Because of this myth about Jewish men, and because of the silence and denial that exists in the Jewish community, the victim will frequently feel that she alone is experiencing violence at the hands of a Jewish man. She may reason that since no other Jews have ever gone through this, she, as victim, must somehow be responsible for creating this behavior in her spouse. This self-blame is reinforced by well-meaning family and friends who also believe the myth and hold her to blame (39).

An interesting article written about rape also sheds light on the Jewish woman's experience of violence. According to Pauline Bart, interviewed by Susan Schneider (61), Jewish women are more likely than women of other ethnic and religious groups to have an assault end in rape rather than "rape avoidance." In other words, Jewish women are less likely than others to resist rape. Bart attributes this to a lack in "rage reaction." She describes how women of other cultures and religions have an attitude of "who does he think he is that he can do this to me?" and "nobody has a right to do this to me." This is actually a protective response that leads to resistance and fighting back and most successfully prevents the rape from happening. Pleading and crying are associated with being raped, while physical resistance, yelling and active resistance are associated with rape avoidance. Jewish women are not raised to see the world as a scary place that they must learn to cope with; the socialization of

Jewish girls doesn't emphasize fighting back. Jewish girls are not socialized to express rage but rather to channel it into productive activity (60). What Jewish women tend to do when somebody tries to rape them is talk their way out of the situation. Jews have traditionally survived by accommodation, and trying to lay low and live under the radar, so to speak. Jewish women, and Jews in general, feel that there is an invisible shield, protecting them from harm; they tend to be trusting, less suspicious and therefore vulnerable. Were finessing, arguing, using verbal techniques and offering money effective at warding off attackers, then Jewish women would be particularly successful at dodging abuses. Instead these methods are fruitless and end in the perpetrator's triumph. Interestingly, during the Nazi regime this Jewish strategy of using verbal argument and trusting in others was proved unsuccessful; this article shows how this same strategy is ineffective for preventing rape (61).

It may be because of anti-Semitism that Jews have developed these life strategies. Because Jews had to always be prepared to flee their homes through the ages, wealth and material possessions had to be easily transportable and could not be in the form of land, large houses or many books. Therefore, the most typical style of learning was verbal skill developed through argument (60). Physical expression was second to verbal expression and thus Jewish women have learned to meet assault with argument rather than action.

So too with intimate partner violence. Jewish women may be more likely to face abuse by their husbands with an accommodating response rather than with rage. They tend to think about what they can do to talk their spouse out of

perpetrating the violence, they cry, plead and, most of all, tolerate. This is not in any way meant as an invalidation or blaming of Jewish domestic violence victims, but rather to comment on a pattern and perhaps find solutions by alternative strategies. Jewish women may not react with rage but with sadness, not with self-esteem and outrage but with a downtrodden acceptance.

Does this mean Jewish women have low self-esteem compared to other women? Such a study has not been attempted. However, in the survey conducted by Bart some important patterns were noted. One of the features associated with rape avoidance is having parents who did not intervene when you got into fights as kids. Jewish parents are unlikely to tell their children to fight their own battles, but the experience of fending for oneself, to a certain extent, leads to increased independence and ability to take care of oneself. Contact sport and martial art experience as a child was also associated with rape avoidance. Jewish girls tend to get every other kind of lesson as children but not lessons in how to get knocked down, and then get back up. Women who had more childhood responsibility, caring for younger siblings, preparing meals, or other household chores, were also more likely to avoid rape when attacked. But Jewish women tend to be raised in families with fewer children, and tend to have fewer household responsibilities, and have few ways of feeling like competent, effective human beings other than in areas related to intellect. Finally, in their own families, Jewish women are extremely able to tolerate being put upon: in their families they tend to worry about how their husbands and children are feeling and put their own feelings last. Self-esteem is a strong sense of who one is, that one is worthy, and that one owns

ones' body. Without this strong sense of self it is easy for women to submit, succumb, accommodate, and tolerate.

Table 2: Barriers to leaving abusive marriages in the Jewish community

Values	Law	Cultural Factors
Shalom bayit	Get/ Divorce Law	Financial dependence
Bashert		Lack of appropriate shelters
Marriage as life's greatest blessing		Community disapproval
Teshuva		Community silence/disbelief
Lashon hara		Rabbi/community ignorance
Chilul Hashem		Shidduch for children
Male/female traditions		Shanda
Woman of valor		Fear of anti-Semitism
		Jewish woman stereotypes
		Jewish man stereotypes
		Self blame/belief in uniqueness of her situation
		Isolation
		Culture of accommodation
		Verbal vs. physical resistance
		Childhood learned dependence/lack of responsibilities
		Possible low female self esteem

### Abuse in Jewish Law

There are however, many Jewish values and laws that should show both women and communities that abuse is not to be tolerated or endured. The following is a discussion of abuse in Jewish law and the scriptural response to marital violence.

The teachings of Judaism unequivocally renounce and condemn the use of

violence, verbal or physical, directed toward anyone, except in the context of war, self-defense, or preservation of the public order. In the Talmud (62) it states, “He who lifts his hand to strike another is termed evil.” It also states, “He who breaks objects in his fury is as if he worshipped other gods.” The Jewish tradition, therefore, prohibits even raising a hand to strike another, and places great emphasis on the need to control anger. In the Talmud (63), Jewish law is outlined that “we not create an atmosphere of excessive fear in the home and that we address our families in a quiet, gentle way.”

There are various sources in Jewish scriptures and law that affirm the illegality and immorality of wife abuse. In fact, that intimate partner violence, including sexual abuse, existed in biblical times is indisputable because there is much discussion in rabbinic writings about spouse abuse and forced sexual relations. These problems are not new to the Jewish community. In Deuteronomy 24:6 the statement “He shall not harm” refers to a husband with his wife (64). This is therefore a Biblical prohibition against wife abuse. Rabbi Moshe Isserles in the Shulchan Aruch writes, “It is a sin for a man to beat his wife, and if he does this habitually the court can punish him, excommunicate him and whip him, and apply all measures of force until he takes an oath never to do so again. If he violates this oath he may be compelled to divorce her (65).” He also states that the abusive husband can be “put under a ban, and excommunicated, and flogged, and punished with various forms of torment; one should even cut off his hand if he is accustomed to it [wife beating] (66).” This penalty is so severe because the Rabbi being quoted sees wife-beating as a more

serious offense than assaulting any other person because a husband takes on a specific obligation to honor his wife in the ketubah beyond the normal obligation of respecting other creatures of G-d. Rabbi Meir of Rothenberg (HaMaHaRam) writes (67), “A Jew must honor his wife more than one honors himself. If one strikes his wife, one should be punished more severely than for striking another person, for one is enjoined to honor one’s wife, but one is not enjoined to honor another.” Rabbi Mordechai ben Hillel, a halachic (legal) authority in the Middle Ages writes, “just as with another person whom one is commanded not to beat...even more so with one’s wife, whom one is obliged to honor more than one’s own self” (68). The Talmud relates the story of a man who had libeled his wife and was shown to be a liar – “they brought him before the court and lashed him” (69). Also, a husband who threatened to abandon his wife was imprisoned and a man who cursed his wife and called her names was compelled to sit barefoot in the synagogue and request forgiveness in public (70). In Hasidic literature, Rabbi Nachman of Breslau writes, “If one spends all one’s murderous anger on her, shames her, raises one’s hand to her – G-d forbid – the Almighty will demand recompense of him (71).”

The Talmud states that on Judgement Day all Jews will be asked, “Did you relate to G-d with reverence?” “Did you relate to people with reverence?” The two are placed on equal footing. Certainly one’s spouse falls in the category of “people” and therefore Judaism teaches we must revere and value our spouse accordingly (34).

In Yevamos 62B of the Talmud it says that a man should “love his wife as

much as he does himself and should respect her even more than he respects himself (72).” Obviously both emotional and physical abuse are a direct violation of this directive. Maimonides (73), states that a husband must speak gently to his wife and should not be tense or short-tempered. Rashi (74) writes that a husband should “speak calmly with her using soft language.” In the Talmud (75), one of the Sages states that a man should be most meticulous in giving proper respect to his wife, because the blessing of the household is by virtue of the wife. In that same passage, husbands are commanded “not to bring tears” to their wives. The Talmud says “Do not be a lion in your home,” and the Talmudic sages forbid the husband to make himself feared in the home (63). Pirkei d’Rabbi Nathan (34) states, “At all times, let a man be as supple as the reed and not as rigid as the cedar.” In Shulchan Aruch (65) it states, “A man who has frequent outbursts of temper and chases his wife from his house, the Bet Din (court) compels him to divorce her.” Rabbi Meir of Rothenberg says, “Rabbi Paltoi Gaon rules that a husband who constantly quarrels with his wife must remove the causes of such quarrels, if possible, or divorce her and pay her ketubah; how much more so must a husband be punished, who not only quarrels, but actually beats his wife” (76). A man may also not tease his wife verbally by saying “This is what I said of you with my friends” (34). The Jewish sages insist that the man must take his wife’s psychological state into consideration. “If your wife is a dwarf, you must bend over and consult with her” (75). And “A man must be careful in oppressing his wife” (77). The sages also say, “If he wishes his wife to die...she eventually buries him” (78).

Maintaining human dignity is an extremely important ethic in Judaism. In the Torah, embarrassing one's neighbor is likened to killing, as it says, ". In the Talmud, Berachot 19B, it says, "Maintaining the dignity of a person is so great it may override halachah (79)." The Zohar, a source on Jewish mysticism, states, "One dare not demean any human being in the world" (80). There are countless other references that assert the Jewish ethic of human dignity, even the dignity of a criminal being executed for a capital offence (81). Clearly, one's wife falls under the category of a person deserving of dignity and honor.

The Ketubah, Jewish marriage contract, is directed toward what the husband owes his wife in marriage and in divorce (82). It says, "I will work and support and honor my wife." It does not say, "I will love my wife (34)." According to Rabbi Dratch (83), love is subsumed in the term "work." It does not mean "I will work to earn money" but "I will work to love." This love is not the love of romance, passion and gratification of physical needs. It is the conscious effort to treat someone well and take care of someone. In the Jewish tradition it is taught that the true love of marriage is not the love of the wedding day, but the love that you have afterwards, throughout the marriage. It takes time to develop this love. It is the love of giving, sharing, working things out together, and respecting each other's needs; it is a selfless love (83).

The ketubah delineates the husband's requirement to feed, clothe, and provide for all aspects of the wife's needs, including her sexual satisfaction (82). It states that the husband must provide for his wife according to the standards of the times and community. He may not give her less than what is given to other

women in the community by their spouses. This document is further indication of the Torah's desire to protect the needs and dignity of the Jewish wife. The fact that the Torah explicitly requires him to satisfy her sexually, and not vice versa, shows that sex is not for the man's sole pleasure but must be a joint act of shared pursuit.

The Torah's attitude on "marital rape" and sexual abuse is very clear. The halacha is stated by the Rambam, Maimonides, "He is not to have intercourse while drunk, nor in the midst of a quarrel; he is not to do so out of hate, nor may he take her by force with her in fear of him." And, "He is not to rape her or take her by force, but rather with her consent and as a result of conversation and joy" (84). Rabbi Jacob ben Rabbi Asher wrote, "Rape – even of one's wife – is forbidden" (85). In fact, the woman is awarded the right to refuse a husband's request to have sexual intercourse. "He must have intercourse only with her consent, and if she refuses, he should appease her until she agrees (85). Furthermore, "If a woman claims that her husband does not lie with her in any way similar to the way husbands lie with their wives...this claim suffices for him to be compelled to divorce her" (86). Similarly, he states, "Jewish women are not abandoned persons obliged to have sexual relations with husbands who disgust them" (86). Maimonides also writes, "The Sages forbade a man to have intercourse while thinking of another woman" (87).

The Jewish husband may also not force his wife to engage in unusual or degrading tasks. In the Talmud it states, "He may not force her to rise before his father, to rise before his son, or to provide his animals with hay" (88). The Jewish

sages also forbade him to burden her with hard labor (88) or with work to be performed at abnormal times, such as on Saturday night, fast days, or the first of the month; or even harmful to one's sense of aesthetics or to one's health (89). "He cannot force her to work with flax, because flax makes one's mouth smell and chaps one's lips" (88). Moreover, a woman is not required to perform useless tasks according to her husbands whims. Rabbi Jacob ben Asher considers a case where a husband demanded that his wife pour out containers of water for no purpose whatsoever (90). The Tur rules that the husband is not permitted to demand such jobs of his wife (90). One woman interviewed for this study was forced for years by her husband to keep a fully stocked freezer in the house (91). Periodically he would wake her in the middle of the night, dump out the contents of the freezer, and demand that she start cooking to refill it. This most certainly would be forbidden by Jewish law.

Jewish sages also ruled that a husband may not take away the pleasures of life from his wife. All the following are grounds for him being compelled to divorce her. Preventing his wife from tasting fruit or meat (92), stopping making a living for his wife (93, 94), preventing his wife from washing or from wearing shoes (94), or from wearing ornaments (95), or from keeping social ties by preventing her acquaintances and relatives from visiting their home, or vice versa, and preventing her from participating in joyous events or days of mourning with friends and relatives (96) - in all cases the woman is justified in opposing these steps and demanding that her husband divorce her.

A husband is also responsible to take care of any damage he has inflicted

on his wife. “A husband who has injured his wife is obliged to pay her immediately all the damages and all the shame and the distress; it is hers, and her husband is not entitled even to the fruits...and her husband must heal her, as he heals all her illnesses” (97, 98). The Shulchan Aruch says, “He who harms his wife during intercourse is responsible for her damages” (99).

The Torah’s hashkafah is to promote all mundane activities to the spiritual plane. Eating and drinking and all other physiologic requirements are necessary for health and function, and yet become spiritual acts when performed with the goal of doing the Divine will. Even sex is elevated to the spiritual level. Perhaps the message of the mikvah, ritual bath, wherein a woman purifies herself prior to sexual relations, reveals the Torah attitude toward sex. (34) The mikvah is a bath made partially from rain water, which purifies men and women prior to sacred functions. Some men go to the mikvah in preparation for Shabbat and holidays, and the Cohen, priest, would immerse in the mikvah prior to his sacred Temple duties. Clearly the mikvah is therefore a spiritually cleansing bath, and the fact that a woman is required to go before initiating the period of sexual relations, suggests that sex is a sacred act. Therefore forced sex would not only be an assault against the woman, but against the sexual act in itself.

The fact that there are times of the month when sex is permitted between husband and wife, and times when it is prohibited, furthers the concept that sex is holy. As opposed to animal passion and base instinct, the purpose of sex in Jewish marriage is a physical and spiritual union with constant renewal. The periods of abstinence required by the Torah, which could be compared to the laws

of kashrut and Shabbos which require certain abstinences, affirm the holiness of sexual relations.

A discussion about the purpose of the creation of man and woman from the Talmud also sheds light on Judaism's attitude toward marriage. The Talmud teaches (34) that originally G-d created a bisexual creature with two heads, which was called "Adam." Adam was a composite of man and woman. G-d then said, "It is not good for this unit to be one. Let us separate them." The man was not first and then the woman created from him. Rather they were created at the same time and then separated. Why were they split into two beings? The sentence in the Torah says "Na-aseh Ezer K'negdoh," "let us make him a helpmate (100)." "Ezer" means "help" and "k'negdoh" means "in opposition." Thus the term "ezer k'negdoh" describes the way in which the husband and wife help each other. Their interaction and tension, the challenges of co-existing and loving each other, allow both husband and wife to reach their own heights. (34).

Therefore we see that the Torah teaches a peaceful and harmonious way of life that promotes human dignity. Tyranny and abuse in a marriage are antithetical to the Jewish concept of human relationships. A religiously observant man who attempts to justify his dominion in his home is himself a perversion of religious Judaism and a Chilul Hashem (disgrace to G-d).

In the Torah there is also concept of community responsibility. If a person is found murdered and the assailant is unknown, the elders of the nearest community must declare, "Our hands did not spill this blood" (81). The community leaders, according to the Talmud, must conduct a search to ascertain

whether the crime could have been as a result of the community failing to provide for the victim's welfare (34). This is a powerful lesson that shows the Torah's belief in the duty of a community to provide for the safety and needs of its inhabitants. There is also a passage in the Torah, "Neither shall thou stand idly by the blood of thy neighbor (53). This is meant to teach that anyone who knows someone who is in danger has the responsibility to do whatever he/she can to attend to the needs of the victim. Thus not only does Judaism promote peace and nonviolence in the home but also charges the community with the responsibility for upholding this. Clearly these passages teach that the community is at fault when it allows for violence within its midst. The community is obligated to ensure the safety of all its members.

#### Agunot – Women Who are Trapped

There are however, some problems that arise for Jewish women due to Jewish law that can make it harder for them to find freedom from their abusive marriages. Specifically I am speaking about the laws of Gitin, divorce. Halacha, Jewish law, specifies that a marriage can only be dissolved by the death of a spouse or a get, divorce document. A get must be given willingly by the husband and can be obtained no other way (101). Not even a Bet Din, Jewish court, can issue a divorce decree. Unfortunately this sometimes leads to the wife becoming an agunah, or "chained" woman if the husband refuses to grant his wife a get. Some husbands may flee the country, perhaps take up with another woman, even remarry, and settle down with a new life, while their wives back home are trapped

in purgatory. The wife is essentially at the mercy of her husband and if he refuses to give her a get, she is trapped in the marriage until he either dies or agrees to give her the divorce document. One woman is deaf as a result of severe battering but her husband prefers to beat her than divorce her (102). She is trapped in her marriage for as long as he chooses to keep her.

According to a rabbi associated with the Boston Bet Din, women request divorces more often than do men. Between 5% and 10% of husbands are considered recalcitrant, defined by the refusal to give a wife a get within three years after the civil separation (103).

Without a get, a woman may not remarry, and if she remarries without a get any of her progeny is considered to be a momzer, illegitimate. The status of momzer precludes one from marrying another Jew and is a status that gets passed on to one's children and lasts multiple generations. If a woman does have a sexual relationship while still technically married she is in danger of losing custody of her children and joint property rights. If she subsequently receives a divorce from her husband she may not marry her lover in a Jewish court.

In some cases the husband uses his power to refuse a get as a means of extortion, to gain custody of the children or to demand huge sums of money. This type of blackmail may include lump sum payments, extremely low child support, demanding personal property such as a house or car, and child custody. A husband may gradually up the ante each time his wife acquiesces until she must concede everything, her children included, or remain his wife. Women are therefore sometimes forced to buy a divorce from their husbands. Because many

women are unwilling to become homeless or destitute, dependent on relatives, or relinquish custody of their children with the risk of never seeing them again, family members and friends, as well as social workers, rabbis and readers of newspapers, perceive women as not really wanting to get away from the men who batter them (104).

The get process can also lead to forced reconciliation, and control of sexuality and reproduction; by denying a divorce a woman's reproductive potential and social life are limited. Rabbinical courts are often helpless to aid the agunah. Halacha does not allow for alterations of existing law, and Rabbis are forced to work within its framework. To some this may seem chauvinistic or antiquated. However, Torah observant people consider Torah law a fact of reality and immutable as the laws of nature. Unfortunately just as scientists cannot prevent the wrong person, such as a terrorist, from gaining scientific knowledge and using it in the wrong way, there is no way to prevent the perversion of Torah law by the abusive husband (34). The Talmud states that when applied properly the Torah can be the panacea of life, but in the hands of unscrupulous people, Torah can be misused as a deadly poison (105). The abusive husband who refuses to grant his wife a get is converting Torah into a weapon.

One woman remarked, "When I began the legal process, he was very agitated. He said everything was his, and beat the small children...He said it is his house, his furniture, he said that he was not willing to give me the divorce but I should leave if I wanted to. He [said] he would not divide up the property and no rabbinical court and no court of law would be able to take anything from him.

He would stand there and yell and scare the girls and me too but I would not show him [that I was scared] (104).”

Historically the problem of agunah was most troublesome in wartime, as husbands were sometimes missing-in-action and death could not be determined. Torah authorities went to great lengths to aid the woman in such a situation, and to accept pieces of evidence to be able to assume halachically that the husband did indeed die, making the wife free to remarry. The modern problem of agunah due to the wayward husband's refusal to give a get was not serious in the days in which the Jewish community was close-knit and interdependent. The Bet Din would threaten to excommunicate the recalcitrant husband and social pressures would force the husband to give a get. Furthermore rabbinical orders to grant a get were more likely obeyed when the Jewish court was the center of one's society. Today the social structure is much freer and rabbinical courts have become almost powerless. Agunot (plural) are sometimes trapped in their situations for years.

Rabbis today are working hard to seek ways in which to free the agunah from her bondage and to protect women from becoming agunot. A popular pre-nuptial agreement was written several years ago and some Rabbis today refuse to marry a couple without it. It states that for each day a get is not granted, the husband is required to pay his wife a large sum of money decided upon prior to the wedding, thereby creating a financial penalty for the obstinate husband (38).

In contrast to this country, in Israel, where religious courts reign, there has been more of an opportunity to inflict punishments on the husband who refuses to

give a get. Since 1953, compulsion may be enforced with incarceration of the recalcitrant spouse (104). One man was incarcerated, for refusing to give a get, for 32 years and died in prison (104). His wife was an agunah for over 3 decades. In 1994 new sanctions were added to aid the enforcement of compulsion. These range from driver's license revocation to blockage of bank accounts to preventing the man from leaving the country, to revocation of professional and business licenses, to suspending employment (106). Nevertheless these strategies are rarely employed.

Rabbinical courts can also hurt women by acquiescing repeatedly to the husband's desire for reconciliation even after the wife asks again and again for a get. They thereby become agents for creating an agunah. One woman had been married for 8 years, during 3 of which she was trying to get a divorce. Each time the couple was scheduled to advance the divorce, her husband claimed he wanted to reconcile. The bet din judges would quickly agree, the couple would be told to return home, and the beatings continued. The wife would then schedule another hearing and the cycle of reconciliation would continue (104). Forced reconciliation is a technique the husband may use at any point in the divorce process. It allows them to harness the power, gain legitimacy for their behavior, and receive community affirmation for their "hard work" at maintaining the family unit (104).

According to some who work on behalf of agunot, the problem at hand is really related to corrupt rabbinical courts. They feel the batei din (plural) do not do enough to help agunot and do not exercise all their power for her sake. One

woman in a lecture I heard compared a bet din to a lion's den, from whence you may emerge dead or without children or money. She even suggested that some rabbinical courts in our country are run by reshaim (wicked men). She advised that an effective and sensitive court should rule that no negotiations be made until after the get is given. A set of standards has been written by an organization called Le'Maan Bnos Yisroel (LBY), which dictate policies that are designed to protect a woman from becoming an agunah and, as a spokesperson for LBY said, avoid a chilul hashem (desecration of G-d's name) (107). She further suggested that a person should not go to a bet din unless the judges sign a document that they will adhere to these standards. Norma Joseph (107) called for bet din reform. She cited that a bet din is allowed to summon a man to give a get, and if they summon him 3 times without his appearance, they may excommunicate him, or put him in charem (isolation); yet rabbinical courts don't exercise this power. She called on batei din for unconditional gittin (plural), standardized fees, funds to pay for the get if the woman cannot pay, and refusal to be complicit to blackmail.

A husband's refusal to give a get is an obvious abuse of power. A husband who batters is offered a practical and legal tactic to continue to control and punish his wife. He is able to hold his wife hostage by taking a Torah law and turning it into a weapon of tyranny and oppression. "Without exception, every case of agunah, every case of a husband's refusal to give a get, will reveal a history of a woman's having been abused during marriage" (34). This last, and perhaps greatest abuse of power is one which occurs at the hands of batterers and tyrannical controllers. Rabbi Gamliel says, "When the woman wants a divorce

and the husband does not, and delays granting her a divorce to take his vengeance upon her for his own motives...this is not G-d's desire, and he is punished by Heaven" (101).

Norma Joseph (107) related that men are finding new and innovative ways to creatively destroy women's lives. One man was refusing to give his wife a get, thereby rendering her an agunah. But he further betrothed his 11 year old daughter to an unknown man in another country, thereby making it impossible for her to marry, and rendering her an agunah as well at this young age.

While there is no assurance that the agunah problem can be prevented, the husband is more likely to grant a get at an earlier stage in the couple's marriage. Once the wife has become deeply dependent on him and his ability to dominate has lasted long enough for him to accept it as a way of life, he will be more reluctant to grant his wife freedom. The longer a marriage lasts, the more children a couple has, and the more times a wife returns to her husband after leaving him, the more danger she is in of being trapped. As the husband's power becomes stronger, the woman's chance to be free becomes smaller. Counselors, Rabbis, friends and relatives who advise a woman to return to her abusive husband may be doing her a grave disservice and could be partly to blame as a woman becomes an agunah.

One woman went to her rabbi repeatedly about the physical abuse her husband was perpetrating (108). The rabbi kept advising her to go back and seek shalom bayit. After 10 years she finally sought a different rabbi, after much agonizing thought, because she felt you are supposed to receive halachic decisions

from only one rabbi, and this man immediately advised divorce. By then the husband was completely dependent emotionally on his wife, battering his wife almost daily, and he refused to give a get. She has been an agunah now for 5 years.

## **Discussion**

A survey of the existing literature suggests that intimate partner violence occurs with the same prevalence in Jewish households as it does in the United States at large. Though this surprises many Jews and non-Jews alike, who share the stereotyped belief of non-violence among Jewish men, this is not the truly alarming statistic regarding Jewish abuse. What is suggested by the existing literature is that Jewish women stay in abusive relationships longer, have more difficulty leaving and by deduction must be suffering more years of damaging inflictions upon their physiques and psyches.

It appears that spirituality and cultural identification are both sources of strength and impediments for victims. Spirituality, defined as beliefs and practices through which people develop personal values and their own beliefs about meaning and purpose in life (109), shapes responses to and recovery from trauma. Strong cultural affiliation means that victims' experiences of leaving abusive partners are family and community focused. There are many factors within Jewish religious and cultural ideology that are impediments to leaving. Yet a careful analysis of Jewish scriptures and holy texts reveals that Judaism speaks clearly against intimate partner violence and supports strong community involvement towards victim support and abuser admonishment. It is interesting therefore that intimate partner violence and its "acceptance" cannot be attributed solely to the religion but also to ancient patriarchal ideology and the culture of being a minority in America.

The crucial point derived from the results of this study is that the barriers to leaving tend not to be Scriptural, or purely religion-based, but are related to Jewish

culture, values and traditions. It appears not to be doctrine which compels Jewish women to endure intimate partner violence for an average of fourteen years of silence, but a sense of affiliation to community and a social system built upon traditions, values, history, and isolation. To further elucidate the experience of being part of a minority religious community in the United States, and to further explain the disparity between the Jewish and general American population with regard to length of stay in violent relationships, a look at another Middle Eastern minority religious group can help.

Much can be learned by looking at the literature about intimate partner violence in Muslim American communities. Drawing comparisons and pointing out differences can help in understanding the cultural, religious and societal factors that affect the Jewish woman's experience of her abuse. Several studies and reviews have been done within the Islamic world with perhaps a more systematic and scientific approach than those in the Jewish community. More statistics exist, more numbers available to quantify the issue, and more specific studies looking at individual factors in the Muslim experience.

No study has been done to quantify intimate partner violence in Moslem American families, though surveys in Egypt, Palestine, Israel and Tunisia show at least one out of three women is beaten by her husband. One study of Arab adolescents from Israel revealed that 76% of the adolescents reported having witnessed their fathers abusing their mothers (110). Like Jewish intimate partner violence, surveys indicated that all Moslem women are at risk regardless of age, education, level of income, area of residence, size of families or stage of marriage (110).

The Muslim experience of intimate partner violence differs from that of Jews in the effect of social stigma related to divorce. The Prophet Mohammed said, "Allah did

not make anything lawful more abominable to Him than divorce (11).” Because divorce is strongly discouraged and disapproved of in Islamic scripture, and a strong social stigma is associated with divorce in Arab cultures, victims may endure abuse that is prolonged and severe before leaving (11). The divorce law is a significant barrier to ending battering relationships. A study of divorced women in Moslem Arab society in Israel reveals that participants were referred to by their society as “broken glass,” from the Arabic saying, “Glass once broken can never again be made whole” (11). Divorced women viewed themselves as permanently deficient and social pariahs. Of all the causes for divorce cited by participants, prolonged and severe physical and sexual abuse was the most common.

Similar to Jews, as both cultures are classified as group-oriented cultures, Moslem women are socialized to believe that the needs of their children and extended family members take precedence over their own well-being and personal safety. Women in both cultures are expected to uphold the reputation of their families. Given the tremendous stigma associated with divorce in Arab societies, upholding the family’s reputation often is synonymous with staying with the abuser. In both societies, family unity and harmony are of paramount importance, and individualism could be construed as subordinate to both family and community.

In both Islamic and Jewish culture there is a significant barrier regarding women being able to obtain divorces from their husbands. Earlier the issues regarding obtaining a Jewish get, and the concept of the agunah woman were discussed. Getting khula (an Islamic divorce initiated by wives) parallels this. By judicial decree an Islamic court can issue a khula to a woman seeking divorce. But because there is no Islamic court in

America, individual male leaders, many of whom are acquainted with the abusers personally and are unsympathetic to the victims, have taken on the role of granting khula. Often women divorce-seekers are not given their religious divorce, as in the case of the Jewish agunah. In both cultures, this challenge extends the window of time during which the couple is estranged but not yet divorced. This is troublesome given the increased risk of femicide that has been documented during the process of leaving abusive relationships (11). The dynamic of the husband wielding the power regarding the issuance of divorce in both religious groups allows him to maintain coercive control over his victim. The difference between Muslim and Jewish women, compared with non-Muslim and Jewish American women, then appears not to lie in the dynamic of power and control itself, but rather in the weapons abusers have at their disposal to coerce victims.

As several researchers have described a four step process of leaving violent marriages (25), discussed earlier, Hassouneh-Phillips (11) identifies four steps in the process of Muslim women leaving their abusive husbands. These four steps can similarly be applied to the case of the Jewish woman. Step one is “reaching the point of saturation.” Though for Jews divorce is allowed it is still often feared and avoided by victims because of their close-knit community and family-oriented ideals. Muslims know that Allah hates divorce. Aware of the tremendous social stigma associated with divorce, victims typically decide to leave their abusers only after experiencing severe psychological, spiritual and/or physical abuse. When victims perceive that their choices are either to leave or die- psychologically, spiritually and/or physically- they have reached the point of saturation. Step two is getting khula, or obtaining a get, a challenging process in both cases. Step three is “facing family and community

disapproval.” This stage highlights the extremely limited availability of social support for victims during this difficult process, though it appears there are many more intimate partner violence advocacy groups, hotlines and shelters in Jewish America than Moslem America. Once a place of belonging, both Jewish and Moslem communities often can become a source of fear and rejection after leaving an abusive spouse. In both cases women are often forced to reexamine and reformulate the meaning of their religion and community in their lives. This leads to step four, “spiritual awakening - reclaiming the self.” Interestingly, in Muslim American women, “reclaiming the self” tends to occur when women are most alienated from their communities. The loss of community, though painful, frees women from constraints of group norms, allowing their individuality to emerge unchecked.

Hassouneh-Phillips (111) describes three post-abuse spiritual paths for Muslim American women. She calls them Retainers, Rejecters and Reinterpreters. In her sample, 23% of women were Retainers, pursuing the path of no change in their original belief system. Rejecters, 8% of the sample, completely abandoned their Muslim identity. Reinterpreters comprised 69% of the sample and engaged in a selective critique of those beliefs and practices that they perceived to be disempowering to women. No such study has been done with Jewish victims but I suspect a similar pattern of spiritual direction for formerly abused women.

Spirituality, as previously discussed in relation to Jewish victims, can similarly both be a source of strength and vulnerability for Muslim survivors of intimate partner violence. Some studies have found that spirituality in general is a source of strength for healing and allows victims to accept themselves, let go and move on with their lives.

However other commentaries on the topic of religion and intimate partner violence suggest that spiritual beliefs promote suffering in silence and victim blaming that may impede women's ability to resist and recover from abuse. Clearly religious dictates that emphasize the importance of marriage while strongly discouraging divorce, place women at risk for entering into and staying in abusive relationships. One study found that strong religious beliefs, among other factors, are predictive of symptoms of posttraumatic stress disorder among battered women (111).

As alluded to earlier, spirituality and a strong relationship with G-d can provide an important means of coping with ongoing violence, and with the aftermath of leaving, for both Jewish and Muslim women. For both Jews and Moslems, prayer, ritual and meditation provide a sustaining force when there seems to be no where else to turn. Conversely, spirituality as vulnerability comes from the interpretation, or misinterpretation of various religious texts. For Muslim women, belief in an afterlife was cited as influencing women's response to abuse. The idea that this life does not matter and that G-d will reward women who suffer as they try to keep their families intact is one that could be coming into play with both religions. Some Muslim women described being a good wife in the face of adversity as a form of righteousness. The belief that being a good wife is a path to heaven leads women to seek to meet their marital obligations while hampered by their ability to care for themselves and maintain their safety (111).

Returning to the notion of Retainers, Rejecters and Reinterpreters, they are each following a spiritual path of strength. Rejecters' individual freedom of interpretation and action empowers them to combat fatalism and abusers' attempts to maintain power and

control via manipulation of religious doctrine. Conversely, Retainers' conformity with group norms allows them to remain connected to their strong system of faith and community. In between these polar opposites, Reinterpreters attempt to balance the strength and vulnerability that come with ascribing to a strong, insular community with well-defined and group-oriented ideals and doctrines.

In both Jewish and Moslem communities there is a conspiracy of silence amongst all protagonists of the intimate partner violence drama. The victims are reluctant to report marital violence because of the risk of facing social isolation and ostracism. Extended families stay silent out of belief that the nuclear family unity and cohesiveness should be maintained. Violent husbands find refuge in their misinterpretation of religious and legal doctrine which they use to assert themselves as master of the household. Muslim abusers may even assert based on certain passages from the Koran that they have a religious and legal duty to discipline their wives. Health professionals and spiritual leaders are silent because of their beliefs in stereotypes and myths which lead them to minimize and ignore victims' accounts, and label victims as delusional or masochistic, and as blame-worthy.

Thus a comparison of these two religious groups, similar in their Middle Eastern origin, patriarchal societies, group-oriented communities, faith and spirituality based mores, and minority status in the United States, reveals insight into the experience of the Jewish woman victim, which can be extrapolated to other groups as well. We learn that such minority groups living within the United States face unique hindrances and suffer in silence longer, not so much because of their religious doctrines, because in the case of Jews these reveal strong anti-violent ideals. Thus intimate partner violence and its

“acceptance” cannot be attributed to religion alone. But it is the community oriented framework, the social structure, and the experience of being the oppressed minority which perhaps impacts the most on the experience of the Jewish American victim. Thus it is not the fault of Jewish ideology that Jewish women stay in abusive marriages longer, but rather the cultural and psychological conditions that create and support this kind of violence in our societies. This knowledge is an essential precursor to providing culturally competent and meaningful care to abused women from diverse faith backgrounds.

Elison (112) says, “Traumatized people feel utterly abandoned, utterly alone, cast out of the human and divine systems of care and protection that sustain life. Thereafter, a sense of alienation, of disconnection, pervades every relationship, from the most intimate familial bonds to the most abstract affiliations of community and religion.” Gluck (45) said, “The single most powerful factor contributing to intimate partner violence is the ability to get away with it.” It is the community which in large part is the enabler.

Every woman I interviewed reported that they stayed in their abusive relationships because of the lack of resources available in their Jewish communities (56, 91, 102, 108, 113, 114). Many felt lost, alone and confused. Because intimate partner violence was not talked about, they believed they singularly faced this problem. They hid in shame because they believed they were to blame. These women were made to feel responsible for their troubles, because no one ever said otherwise and no one was there to offer support.

Many women did indeed read secular books on intimate partner violence but felt the author was not speaking to them. The books they read told them to leave their husbands, but, as one related, “Don’t I have a duty as a Jew to stand by my decision?”

(91) The books did not help because they so clearly were of a different world, a secular world which offers shelters and hotlines, and advertisements on subway cars. These women were alone and faced their abuse alone. The silent community is at fault; it condones the violence by neglecting to acknowledge it.

A responsible community must raise awareness of intimate partner violence and openly state that spouse abuse does indeed exist within its bounds. Support services such as shelters, hotlines, and counseling should be available. The Rabbi or leaders of the community should make a point to speak about such issues in an open forum and to encourage awareness, discussion, and help seeking. Mikvahs and women's groups should certainly advertise resources and support services that are available and should organize ways to help victims and encourage their voices to be heard. One community I am aware of, in Riverdale, NY, has organized a women's group that meets once a month about the issue of intimate partner violence. These women are trained by professionals, such as psychologists, social workers, and Rabbis, to serve as a support network for victims of spouse abuse. These women then advertise their phone numbers in the local synagogues, Jewish community centers, and mikvahs so that victims can have community resources to turn to, which are safe, local and educated. This type of communal shared responsibility and proactive response is commendable and desirable.

I heard an interesting anecdote at a conference about intimate partner violence in 2003, relayed by Dr. Nora Groce (115). She spoke of a strong South-American community that had taken a stand on wife abuse. If a woman was heard crying or screaming in her hut because of the battering of her husband, all the women of the community would gather outside their home and stand watch. When her cries got louder

they would file to the front door and call for the husband to come out. They would then escort him to his mother's house and all the men would stop what they were doing to watch him walk in shame. After a prescribed period of time he would return to his wife and the community would keep a close watch. Apparently there were few men who repeated the abuse against their wives. The community had spoken; it had taken a stand that such was not their way and was not acceptable. The children witnessed this from a young age and understood the shame of such deeds. Men who perpetrated assaults against their wives were deeply embarrassed. The community's unity took on a voice of strength and power and eradicated intimate partner abuse from its midst.

The 1983 Giller and Goldsmith study has some important conclusions that bear repeating here (24). Private therapists were some of the first people abuse victims contacted. This should be seen a sign of encouragement as to the potential such a professional has for making a difference in the life of a victim, but must also be seen as a tremendously weighty responsibility. The therapist can "make it or break it" for the woman who approaches her, as the woman has often not taken any decisive steps at this point. This first step in the process of seeking help and healing can be absolutely crucial and critical. On the other hand, rabbis were contacted by less than 2% of the victims. Shame and stigma, and lack of awareness on the part of the Rabbis, lead to such an astoundingly small number of women seeking help from their spiritual leaders. Women must know their rabbi is a safe person who is educated in this area and sensitive to its complexities. They must hear their rabbis speak on the topic of Jewish intimate partner violence and must see the topic in synagogue newsletters. Posters with hotline and Jewish resource information hung in the synagogue building are also clues that a rabbi

may be approachable. The job of a rabbi is supposed to be spiritual counselor, and this applies not just to questions of liturgy or halacha. The rabbi must work hard to take on the role of mentor and advisor and to gain the trust of his or her community members. As Rev. Dr. Brian Ogawa, a Christian clergyman, writes, “We are present as a symbol, officiant, or enabler at almost every significant occurrence in the lives of people, and thus can fulfill an unparalleled role in offering healing and hope to abused women. Such help must include nurturing of the spirit and faith, nonjudgemental and compassionate caring, and practical and forthright guidance” (41). It is particularly important in Orthodox communities, where the rabbi is figuratively part of each family, that the rabbi must use his leadership to help fight intimate partner violence. In these communities it is quite possible that no steps toward prevention, disclosure or treatment of abuse may occur without his consent (116). That the way in which abused women and abusive men are treated by their community members is modeled after the behavior of the rabbi. Therefore the rabbi must be the central backbone and must stand strong and decisive, just and righteous, on this issue.

And why are religious issues even important in the context of a woman in crisis? Fortune and Hertz write eloquently, “Religious issues or concerns which surface for people in the midst of crisis are primary issues. If not addressed in some way, at some point, they will inevitably become roadblocks to the client’s efforts to resolve the crisis and move on with his/her life. In addition, a person’s religious beliefs and community of faith (church or synagogue) can provide a primary support system for an individual and his/her family in the midst of an experience of family violence (117). Reverend Marie M. Fortune, a Christian minister who has dedicated her life to exploring, exposing and

educating about intimate partner violence in religious communities writes quite beautifully: “The real question is not Why? but, What do people do with that suffering? Transformation is the alternative to endurance and passivity. It is grounded in the conviction of hope and empowered by a passion for justice in the face of injustice. It is the faith that the way things are is not the way things have to be. It is a trust in righteous anger in the face of evil which pushes people to action. Transformation is the means by which, refusing to accept injustice and refusing to assist its victims to endure suffering any longer, people act. We celebrate small victories, we chip away at oppressive attitudes cast in concrete, we say ‘no’ in unexpected places, we speak boldly of things deemed secret and unmentionable, we stand with those who are trapped in victimization to support their journeys to safety and healing, and we break the cycle of violence we may have known in our own lives. By refusing to endure evil and by seeking to transform suffering, we are about G-d’s work of making justice and healing brokenness” (41).

There is also a role for men in the problem of Jewish intimate partner violence, or spousal abuse in any self-contained religious or cultural group. What can men do to affect change? Here’s one example told by a Jewish male domestic violence activist (118). William Greenbaum is an art dealer in Massachusetts, active in his synagogue and civic causes. He is happily married and has 3 daughters. He began to fight intimate partner violence by inviting men he knew to join him in taking a stand against male violence at home. These were “normal” men with little or no experience of intimate partner abuse themselves, yet almost none refused him. One of the first things the men did was offer support to a woman’s organization that runs a shelter for battered women

and children. They marched in the town Fourth of July parade carrying signs saying “Hands are Not for Hitting” and “Strong Men Don’t Bully.” The group, as of 2000, is more than 100 members and it meets regularly with women’s groups to work on shared goals.

It takes courage for men to speak out in such a way and put themselves on the line. They risk being called “sissies” or “wimps” or too pro-feminist. But this type of action is a statement that the responsibility for overcoming intimate partner violence belongs to men and not just women. Too often issues that affect families are branded “women’s issues” and ignored by men. Yet such issues threaten the very fabric of Jewish life and culture and are important in the lives of all Jewish people; men need to collaborate with women to try to solve them.

Another message Greenbaum and his men’s group want to publicize is that jokes and images that degrade women feed into intimate partner violence. He described a building contractor in the group who announces to potential subcontractors, “My work sites are free of sexist language. Don’t bid on this job if your workers can’t handle that (118).”

We learn that it is not Jewish religion, per se, that holds women in violent marriages for fourteen years of silence. It is the Jewish community, its values and cultural factors, which influence the woman’s length of stay. The community’s ignorance, disbelief and stigmatizing, all act as a conspiracy of silence to prolong the suffering of its women victims. A community response is called for to address this tremendous shame.

A closing poem for survivors (119):

In her heart she is a mourner  
for those who have not survived.

In her soul she is a warrior  
for those who are now as she was then.

In her life she is both celebrant and proof  
of women's capacity and will to survive,  
to become, to act, to change self and society.  
And each year she is stronger,  
and there are more of her.

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