

## Continuing Education Session for Volunteer Mikveh Guides I: Abuse and Trauma

*Anything which impinges on the dignity of another person is considered abuse, and is a violation of Torah ethics.*

-- Rabbi Abraham Twerski

*It wasn't until I was an adult that I realized what happened to me as a young woman wasn't OK. My boyfriend was controlling, sometimes insisting that I change my outfit over 20 times before we could go out on a date. He said he was sorry after he was rough with me. My father told my mother he was sorry, too, when he would drink too much and yell at her. Everyone in my family loved my boyfriend. He was planning on being a lawyer. He was Jewish. I thought I was better off because he didn't drink like my father.*

-- Miriam, age 53

Miriam felt alone and isolated in her experience until she saw a flier in her community about a group for Jewish women who had experienced abuse and trauma. This group taught her about the prevalence of abuse in the Jewish community, myths and facts about abuse, the impact of abuse and trauma as a child and as an adult, the healing process, and resources in the Jewish tradition for healing.

The mikveh can be a place of solace, comfort and healing for Jewish survivors of abuse and trauma like Miriam. Ritual immersion can mark a transition in their healing process. At the same time, the intimate exposure of the mikveh can trigger painful memories and feelings for survivors who have come to the mikveh for other reasons. This first of two trainings helps Mikveh Guides understand trauma, abuse, and domestic violence in a Jewish cultural context.

### CORE CONCEPTS

- Since Mikveh Guides provide a welcoming, safe, and comfortable environment for visitors to the mikveh, it is crucial that they be aware of and responsive to the implications of abuse and trauma for mikveh visitors.
- Addressing abuse and trauma in the Jewish community needs to take into account the Jewish cultural context.
- Mikveh Guides should be able to recognize their own reactions to abuse and trauma and maintain a focus on best supporting each visitor to the mikveh.

## OUTLINE OF SESSION

### CONNECTING TOGETHER

10 minutes Introduction and Community Building

### HEART OF THE MATTER

30 minutes Domestic Abuse

60 minutes Domestic Abuse and the Jewish Community

30 minutes Trauma

10 minutes Community Resources

10 minutes Understanding Our Own Reactions: Vicarious Trauma and Self Care

### HOME REFLECTIONS

Suggested Readings

### WRAP UP

10 minutes

## CONNECTING TOGETHER

### *Introduction*

This workshop addresses the vital and challenging work of supporting abuse survivors in the mikveh. Whenever the topic of abuse is broached, it is important to remember that there could be survivors of abuse in the group; we all should be thoughtful and respectful of this possibility in our comments and actions. Discussions of abuse can also trigger memories of past trauma, whether in our own lives or the lives of our friends and family; workshop participants should be alert to their own responses and any need they have to seek support or care for themselves during the workshop.

### *Community Building*

Share with your partner a way that you care for yourself when you encounter stressful or upsetting situations.

## HEART OF THE MATTER

### *Domestic Abuse*

Note: A local domestic abuse program should present a basic overview of domestic abuse.

Information may include:

- Myths and facts about domestic abuse and its prevalence
- Dynamics of domestic abuse
- How to recognize abuse/warning signs
- Why it can be hard for survivors to leave an abusive relationship and what can make it easier to leave or to be safer at home
- How to respond effectively if someone discloses abuse

- What local services are available for survivors and how to access them

### ***Domestic Violence and the Jewish Community***

**Note:** This outline is intended to follow a general training on domestic abuse provided by a local domestic abuse program, as described above. It is not intended to be presented to an audience that has not had some training in the dynamics of domestic abuse.

### What is Judaism?

- Religion
- Culture
- Civilization
- People who identify as Jewish represent a broad spectrum of beliefs and practices. This training is applicable to anyone who identifies themselves as Jewish.

### Demographic Information

- Domestic abuse occurs at roughly the same rate in the Jewish community as it does in the general public.
- Domestic abuse occurs across denominations; it is not concentrated in any one branch of Judaism.

### Spiritual Abuse

- Abusers employ many tactics -- including physical, emotional/verbal, sexual, financial and spiritual abuse -- in gaining power and control over an intimate partner.
- Examples of spiritual abuse include
  - forcing a person to be more or less observant than he or she would otherwise choose to be
  - deliberately violating religious practices/observances such as keeping kosher, the Sabbath, or mikveh
  - forcing one's partner to violate those practices/observances
  - breaking or misusing ritual objects
  - mocking a person's beliefs or practices
  - using isolated pieces of Jewish law, teaching or tradition to justify abusive behavior

### Be Careful with Assumptions and Language

- Don't focus too much on the label (Orthodox, Reform, Humanist, etc.) that a person chooses. Instead, listen to how people describe their practice rather than what label they assign themselves.
- Avoid the word religious.
  - Many non-Orthodox Jews consider themselves deeply religious. The differences between Orthodox and non-Orthodox Jews lie in practice, not commitment or faith.

### Barriers and Challenges for Jewish Survivors

Due to a combination of cultural issues and pressures – as well as additional complications for observant Jews -- Jewish survivors tend to stay in abusive marriages five to seven years longer than other survivors. Jewish survivors encounter several specific barriers in accessing help. Cultural issues (many of which are not unique to Jews) may include:

- Denial:
  - "Abuse doesn't happen in Jewish relationships." "This isn't our problem."
- *Shanda* (shame), which operates at two levels:
  - Individual shame: People who are being abused might feel embarrassed or humiliated that they are "letting it happen to them." Many (if not most) Jews would identify domestic abuse as a *shanda*, and no one wants to be thought of in that way.
  - Community shame: There's a dirty laundry factor at work, too. Many Jews collectively cringe when a Jew is publicly caught doing something unethical or illegal, fearing that it will tarnish the reputation of the whole community. This can make it harder for survivors to come forward, as well as for bystanders in the community to encourage survivors to involve the police, child protective services or other secular authorities who could help.
- *Shalom bayit* (peace at home):
  - Home is traditionally a woman's responsibility, which results in the cultural myth/assumption that if there's not peace at home and a woman is being abused, she must be at least partially at fault.
  - There is strong cultural pressure to have a happy home and a complete, intact family.
- Issues within the synagogue community
  - Fear of living "in a fishbowl" if people find out.
  - Fear that disclosing abuse will be divisive for the community and that other community members will choose sides.

- Concern about whether it will be possible to separate from an abusive partner and still safely remain a part of the community.
- Clergy:
  - Concerns about clergy disapproval or judgment, particularly if the clergy person performed the wedding or knows the abuser well
- *Lashon hora* (evil tongue, gossip or slander):
  - A survivor may worry that telling someone in the community about the abuse amounts to gossiping or speaking ill of the abuser.

There are also practical matters that can make it hard for an observant survivor to leave an abusive situation. These include:

- Concern about keeping kosher in a shelter or hotel
- Concern about the process of asking for and being granted a *get* (Jewish divorce)
- Concern about breaking marriage vows
- Concern about finding new housing that is both affordable and within walking distance of the synagogue
  - Living close to the abuser may not feel safe, but moving farther away means giving up the whole synagogue community (and possible support system) since it becomes impossible to get there (without driving) on Shabbat and festivals.
- Concern about being accused of acting as a rebellious wife

Note: Not all survivors have to leave their homes. It is sometimes possible for an abusive spouse to be ordered out of the house by a judge or for a survivor to be allowed to remain in the house through a separation or divorce agreement.

#### Jewish Values to Emphasize in Working with Survivors

- *Kavod*: individual honor, dignity, respect
- *Pikuah nefesh*: saving a life
- *Tikkun olam*: repairing the world

#### Stereotypes Exercise

This exercise is intended to show how cultural stereotypes of American Jewish men and women can create additional barriers for American Jewish women who are considering talking to someone about an abusive situation.

Supplies: This exercise involves brainstorming and writing the responses in a place where everyone can clearly see them, so you will need chart paper (and a way to affix it to the wall or stand it on an

easel), a black or whiteboard (with chalk or markers), or an electronic way to capture the answers and project them on a wall or screen.

### The Exercise

- Begin by introducing the exercise as a way to think about our stereotypes of American Jewish men and women.
- Ask the group to identify common stereotypes of American Jewish men. Emphasize that you are talking about stereotypes, not what individual participants really think. You'll likely get a wide range of responses, but some of the common ones might include good provider, nice Jewish boy, doctor/lawyer/banker, smart, educated, takes care of his mother (or, put more negatively, a mama's boy), family man, affluent, etc. Note the responses in a column for everyone to see.
- Then ask the group to identify common stereotypes of American Jewish women. Re-emphasize that these are stereotypes, not what people really think. Again, you'll likely get a range of responses, but it's also likely to be a mix of positive and negative attributes. Common responses might include smart and educated, but also aggressive, nagging, demanding, gold-digging or materialistic, JAP (Jewish American Princess), overbearing, loud, opinionated, etc. Note these responses in a second column for everyone to see.
- Discuss, using the following questions as prompts:
  - What does it mean when someone who lives in the shadow of the stereotype of the smart, educated, demanding, materialistic, nagging Jewish woman says that her husband – with the stereotype of being a nice Jewish boy, good provider and real family man – is abusing her? Who tends to have more credibility? How might our stereotypes influence the response that she gets from community members?
  - How do myths about domestic violence and affluence, education, etc. influence the survivor's credibility? How much do those myths influence how seriously a friend, family member or clergy person might take the situation? How does this influence a friend, family member or clergy person's view of the dangerousness of a situation? How do they influence the survivor (feeling perhaps that she is smart and educated and so "should have known better" or "been smarter than this")?
- Conclude by reflecting back the group's observations about how cultural stereotypes might influence a survivor's experience of either thinking about reaching out or actually telling someone about the abuse.
  - Acknowledge that this isn't the whole story. People certainly are far more complicated than stereotypes.
  - Invite the group to reflect on how these stereotypes might affect a Jewish man who is being abused by his wife or girlfriend.
  - Acknowledge that this exercise is limited because of its focus on heterosexual relationships. If there is time, invite the group to reflect on the ways in which our cultural ideas of a Jewish marriage and a Jewish family might impact gay, lesbian,

bisexual and transgender Jews who are thinking about reaching out for help with an abusive relationship.

## ***Trauma***

Note: We strongly recommend that this section of the training be presented by a local trauma expert experienced with domestic violence and/or sexual assault. Ideally this person should be someone with whom the mikveh can develop a long-term relationship to support staff, volunteers, and immersees. We also recommend presenting the model of trauma outlined below, which is based on Judith Herman's Stages of Recovery. However, it is important to stress that survivors do not necessarily experience the stages in a linear order.

### The Nature of Trauma

According to the American Psychiatric Association, there are two essential criteria that characterize trauma: "1) The person experienced, witnessed, or was confronted with an event or events that involved or threatened death or serious injury, or a threat to the physical integrity of self or others, and 2) The person's response was one of intense fear, helplessness or horror" (DSM-IV).

The events that generate trauma can have natural causes, like earthquakes and hurricanes, but this workshop focuses on trauma caused by other people. Such trauma can be personal (child abuse, rape, domestic abuse, etc.) or communal (e.g. terrorism, hate crimes, war). Trauma can include physical, sexual, economic, emotional, financial, and spiritual violations, as well as less threatening abusive situations such as sexual harassment. The essential experiences of trauma can include: loss of control and power, violation of boundaries, lack of safety, difficulty with trust, deregulation of affect, disconnection from one's body, vulnerability, concentration or memory problems, and spiritual/community disruption. One of the key factors in trauma, whether caused by nature or humans, is its long-term effects on survivors.

### The Impact of Trauma

Activity: Read case of Elaine ("50 Ways Not to Leave an Abusive Spouse," Hadassah, [September 1998]) to listen for impact, stages of recovery and influence of Jewish values/religious cultural values.

Reactions to trauma are extremely varied and individual. Mary Harvey (1996) explains that reactions are determined by the following factors:

- The *person*; background/characteristics; history of trauma; functioning and coping abilities; perceptions of the events; cultural, religious, racial, sexual orientation variables
- The *events*: severity, duration and frequency (i.e. a one-time event like rape, or a chronic series of events, as in domestic abuse); whether shared with others or experienced alone; degree of violation
- The *environment*: the physical and social environment in which the trauma took place; how the community responded after the trauma; community attitudes and values; physical and emotional safety

During or immediately after the traumatic event(s), common reactions, mediated by the individual's survival instincts, are characterized as fight, flight, or freeze. In the long run, the impact of trauma can range from

invisible or intermittent to profound effects on daily functioning. Trauma can affect survivors on many levels and in many different (and sometimes contradictory) ways:

- Physical (injuries or somatic reactions, bad health, nightmares, neurobiological reactions, difficulties in daily functioning)
- Cognitive (disruption in mental functioning, perceptions, views of self, others or the world)
- Psychological (intermittent or ongoing feelings of shock, fear, hopelessness, shame, loss guilt, grief, anxiety, etc.)
- Relational (disconnection from others, mistrust, withdrawal, neediness)
- Spiritual (loss of faith, strengthening of faith, meaning-making)

Some survivors suffer from Post Traumatic Stress Disorder, which can manifest as intrusive recollection of the events, numbness, or dissociation from the events. Especially when inflicted by other people, trauma can lead to loss of control and of trust in oneself, others, community and the possibility of order in the world.

### The Stages of Recovery

The recovery process also varies, but often progresses through a series of stages which can continue throughout the lifespan in an ongoing process (Judith Herman, 1992). It is important to note, however, that these stages of recovery are not necessarily linear; survivors may experience them out of order, move back and forth between them, etc.

1. *Safety and Self Care*: During this state, the survivor focuses on creating physical and emotional safety, a safe environment, secure finances, safe relationships, stable physical health, and healthy strategies for dealing with emotions. Priorities during this stage, which can take place of a significant span of time, include comforting oneself, resolving disruptions from trauma, and coping with stress.

2. *Remembrance, Mourning, Integration*: Once safety has been established, the survivor may be ready to explore the impact of the traumatic events. This can involve retelling the story of what happened, grieving physical and emotional losses, and continuing to establish self-care and comfort. Individual and/or group therapy are often critical supports during this stage.

3. *Reconnecting with Others*: This stage is marked by a new understanding of the effects of the traumatic events. Although the reality of the trauma remains, the traumatic impact becomes less disruptive and the survivor, knowing that healing will be ongoing, has more reliable coping strategies and more ability to expand to life and connect with others.

### Getting Help

At all stages of recovery, connecting with others helps to break the isolation and sense of shame, denial, and self-doubt that survivors often feel. Emergency resources are available in most communities or through national hotlines to assist with the immediate consequences of trauma, including establishing safety. Seeking therapeutic help – whether medication or individual or group treatment - is a sign of strength and courage.

For those who are supporting survivors, including in the mikveh, it is crucial to respect their choice and pace at each step of the way - unless people who can't care for themselves, like children, elders or disabled



individuals, are in danger of being harmed. In such situations, it is important to seek help and supervision if you have any questions about how to offer resources.

### *Community Resources*

Note: If possible, this section should be presented by a staff member from the local domestic abuse program.

Most communities have resources to which victims and survivors of trauma and abuse can be referred. It is very important to have a list of these resources, including organizations and hotlines, in the mikveh's dressing room.

Review resources available in your community. If you are unsure whether there is a Jewish-specific program in your community, go to the Resource Directory at [jwi.org](http://jwi.org).

### *Understanding Our Own Reactions: Vicarious Trauma and Self Care*

Take a moment to reflect on your own reactions to this training. Has it evoked painful memories of your own experiences or the experiences of friends and family members? Has it made you feel empowered? Frightened? Concerned?

If participants feel comfortable doing so, they can share their reactions with the group.

It is common and natural, if painful, for working with abused or traumatized individuals to evoke painful episodes in your own history. It can also trigger reactions similar to the ones the mikveh visitor might be experiencing. This is often called secondary or vicarious trauma. You may have feelings of helplessness, powerlessness, fear, betrayal, frustration, anger, and even guilt (at not being able to do enough). In such situations, treat yourself as you would treat any mikveh visitor: with understanding, compassion, and kindness. Be aware of your reactions and needs, and get support and help from your fellow guides, supervisors and staff.

## **HOME REFLECTIONS**

### *Suggested Readings*

"50 Ways Not to Leave an Abusive Spouse" Hadassah (September 1998),

"Surviving Abuse," Jewish Woman (Spring 2003)

## **WRAP UP**

### *Evaluation*