

Child Abuse in the Home - 1997

Torah teaches that children are a gift from God to us, therefore to be cherished and safeguarded.

[Esau] saw the women and the children. "Who," he asked, "are these with you?" He
[Jacob] answered, "The children with whom God has favored your servant."
(Genesis 33.5)

Issue

Child abuse, including sexual abuse, in the home by parents and other family members, both in the community at large and in the Jewish community, is unacceptable behavior and in many cases may be a criminal act.

Background

Domestic abuse of children occurs in four ways: physical abuse, neglect, emotional abuse and sexual abuse, which is labeled incest when it occurs between family members (Center for the Prevention of Sexual and Domestic Violence, 1992). The issue of child abuse was addressed by Women of Reform Judaism in 1977 and 1983.

Child abuse and neglect is linked to violence against women. An estimated minimum of 3.3 million children in the United States witness parental violence. It is also estimated that 70% of men who abuse female partners abuse children. Severe violence against women increases violence against children, who are also injured during efforts to protect their mothers. Substance abuse is often present in families in which there is domestic abuse and is a contributory factor in child neglect. Of 2.9 million cases of child abuse reported in 1992, 45% involved neglect and 27% physical, 17% sexual and 7% emotional abuse; 1,251 of these children died (National Coalition Against Domestic Violence). The Canadian experience is parallel.

Without substantive intervention and services, ramifications for children are life-long. Compared with children from non-violent homes, they are 6 times more likely as adults to abuse a spouse or child. Sons of the most violent parents have a 10 times greater wife-beating rate. In addition to psychological and physical damage and pain, abuse increases the likelihood of arrest as a juvenile by 53%, as an adult by 38% and for violent crime by 38% (National Committee to Prevent Child Abuse).

The extent of sexual abuse of children by adult family members or older siblings is difficult to quantify. Evidence is often not visible; children are threatened with dire consequences if they speak up; they are not always believed; and many victims who delay disclosure until adulthood risk accusations of false memory. As many as 20% of American women and 5-10% of American men experienced some form of sexual abuse as children (American Psychological Association, 1996). Abusers come from all educational, social, economic, ethnic and religious strata of society.

Judicial gender bias against women is a reality. Mothers who bring charges against abusive fathers are often victimized, accused of lying, declared unfit and denied access to the child they seek to protect, who is given into the custody of the abuser. In divorce cases, paternal abuse is often ignored and joint custody or visitation rights granted to the father, further endangering the child (American Bar Association, 1994).

Statistics on child abuse, including sexual abuse, in the Jewish community are not yet available, but there is

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overwhelming anecdotal evidence that it exists in all branches of Judaism. As a community Jews have yet to acknowledge that not all Jewish children are safe in their own homes. The “conspiracy of silence“ once used to deny violence against women is now used to hide abuse against children in the Jewish community.

Resolution

In affirmation of the right of every child to a home that is safe, and in order to ameliorate the lives of children, Women of Reform Judaism calls upon North American Sisterhoods to:

1. Become knowledgeable about domestic child abuse in their communities: its incidence, legislative remedies, availability of protective and communal services, judicial implications and unmet needs.
2. Work with community, advocacy and service organizations to provide professional help for child victims and their families, for adult survivors and for victimizers, including but not limited to support groups, counseling and medical and legal services.
3. Advocate for legislative changes, where necessary, at all levels of government, including the adoption of model codes on family violence and child custody.
4. Support mandated and funded sensitivity training for police, judges, protective services providers and education professionals.
5. Monitor judicial decisions and call for the resignation, transfer or removal of judges who fail to use any and all means at their disposal to protect abused children.
6. Continue efforts to combat violence against women and substance abuse because of the correlation between these problems and child abuse.

In recognition that child abuse, including sexual abuse, occurs in Jewish homes, Women of Reform Judaism calls upon all Sisterhoods to:

1. Work within the congregation and the Jewish community to acknowledge the existence of such abuse as the first step to help and healing.
2. Sponsor programs that focus on the Jewish view of and response to child abuse.
3. Sponsor and support Jewish communal services for abused Jewish children, their families, adult survivors and abusers.
4. Reach out to local congregations of all branches of Judaism to coordinate efforts for joint responses, resources and services.

In addition, Women of Reform Judaism will encourage the Union of American Hebrew Congregations to:

1. Develop programs for all synagogue professionals, including religious school personnel, to help them identify victims and provide intervention and help.
2. Develop age appropriate curricula for all levels of religious schools on the subject of a child’s right to a safe home.

Further, Women of Reform Judaism calls upon Sisterhoods worldwide to monitor domestic abuse of children within their own nations and develop appropriate responses, where and as necessary, to protect children.

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