

D'var Torah San Francisco Hillel
November 19, 2004

This week we read in Parshat Vayetze about Laban's substitution of Leah for Rachel during the wedding to Jacob. While we read of Jacob's surprise and anger at Laban's betrayal, the text says nothing at this point about how either Rachel or Leah felt about switching places. We know that Jacob loved Rachel and did not love Leah. But we don't know whether either of them loved him, or wanted to marry him, or wanted to substitute Leah under the veil. We know nothing about their thoughts or feelings on anything connected to the wedding itself. They are both silent.

Next week we will read about Leah's daughter Dinah, who went out to explore the land and was raped by the son of a local chief. Her father Jacob arranges to marry her off to the rapist, who requests her, and then her brothers seek revenge by slaughtering the men of Shechem. Did Dinah want to be married? Did she want her husband and all his people killed? She does not speak anywhere in the text, and we know nothing about her thoughts or feelings about any of this. Dinah is silent.

When I read about these silent women, whose fates have been arranged and sealed for them by husbands and fathers, I realize that for many women, little has changed in almost 4000 years. Too many young women today are silent about their own lives, and not by choice.

One out of five teenage girls in the U.S. has been abused at some point by a dating partner. This abuse crosses all age groups, ethnic groups, socioeconomic classes, sexual orientations, education levels, and religions. The rates are the same in the Jewish community as non-Jewish. Most of us don't know this, because of a conspiracy of silence.

But silence perpetuates the abuse. Denying that abuse exists in the Jewish community, or turning a blind eye, or assuming that if we don't see bruises it can't be happening, are all ways of preventing women from getting help. Abuse usually happens behind closed doors, so in fact we don't see it. In public, an abuser may appear to be the most wonderful person: a volunteer leader in the congregation, a teacher at Sunday school, everybody's best friend. Who would believe this angry, screaming woman who says she was abused by this nice *mensch* of a guy?

Also, the prohibition against *lashon ha'ra*, or "speaking evil" of someone, often means that people don't want to hear women tell their stories of getting degraded or raped or beaten by their partners, because they worry it will taint the reputation of the abuser. Finally, the Jewish community keeps women from coming forward and telling their stories by perpetuating the myth that domestic abuse doesn't happen to us, or if it *does* happen to *you*, it must be your fault. Women are also silenced by the idea that it is a *shonda*—a shame—to not have *Shalom Bayit*, or Peace in the Home. Some women are so ashamed that they will not tell anyone for years. Some who do tell their stories are re-victimized by a community that tells them to go home and "make Shalom Bayit," or fix everything—as if it were within their power to change their partner's abusive behavior.

How do we change this dynamic? By breaking the silence.

Words can be an empowering tools for change, a source of strength, and a means for healing.

Battered women need safety, and they need resources. But they also need to tell their stories. It is scary and painful to tell the truth about what happened to you, yet it is incredibly healing. If the woman is still with her partner, talking can help her to explore her options and sort through her

feelings. If she has already left, it can help her stay strong on the journey. And if she is thinking about going back, it can help her remember why she left, and what goals lie in her promised land. Telling the story makes it real.

Each time a woman tells her story, she lets a piece of it go; her burden is lighter. If you have ever listened to someone tell you their story of abuse, then you know how it changes your perspective too. Suddenly this isn't some theoretical discussion about domestic violence or sexism or Jewish ethics, but a real person—maybe your friend—and you are transformed by hearing first hand what has happened to her.

Which leads me to the two things that you can do: the first is to LISTEN, and the second is to confront abuse when you hear of it.

Listen. She needs to hear that you believe her, that it is not her fault, that no one deserves to be abused. Sometimes we say this to women over and over again. She has probably heard from her abuser a thousand times that EVERYTHING is her fault, that she's crazy, that she'll never make it without him, that she shouldn't complain, that no one will believe her. It is such a gift you can give, to LISTEN.

Now let's talk about the hardest part: confronting abuse. The Jewish community around the country is doing a lot of creative things to confront abuse. Some examples of synagogue actions to end abuse: starting a domestic violence committee; training staff and religious leaders; putting posters or stickers in women's restrooms; creating educational programs for children and adults; discussing teen dating violence; addressing the issue from the *bima* as we're doing tonight.

So I encourage you all to think about what you can do, and know that Shalom Bayit is always here as a resource if you need us. And please, if you are being abused, tell someone. If you know of a woman being abused, please give the gift of listening.

I will be here through dinner tonight so that I can listen to you – to your questions, your comments, and to your stories.

On behalf of all the women who come to Shalom Bayit for help, I thank you so much for your time tonight. I wish you all peace and many blessings. Shabbat Shalom.