Sustaining Activism for the Long Haul: Seven Secrets to Success

Naomi Tucker, Executive Director

Excerpted from keynote speech at Creating Hope, October 2009, and reprinted here by request.
Honoring Shalom Bayit’s founding Executive Director for 25 years of working in the battered women’s movement

I am so lucky.
When I was a teenager I didn’t plan what I was going to do for the rest of my life. I couldn’t see how the small things I might be doing in the moment could impact my future. I didn’t search for a career path and then choose this one. This path chose me. And for that I am grateful, every day.

Twenty five years ago my high school biology teacher took a small group of honors students on a service project to La Casa de las Madres, a battered women’s shelter in San Francisco. We did a canned food drive for Thanksgiving, and painted the bedrooms for the women in the shelter. My life was forever changed the moment I walked through the doors of the shelter. I looked around at these ordinary women who had taken an extraordinary leap of faith—somehow, believing that they did not deserve to be abused, finding the strength within themselves to leave their home and family at a time when that just wasn’t done—and I knew that this was where the real revolution was happening. The battered women’s movement was less than a decade old then; most people had never heard the term “domestic violence.” Often in secret and always in hiding, the women coming to the shelter were saying no to violence and choosing a path of peace for themselves and their children, without help or encouragement from the outside world. Quietly and without much fanfare, these women were not just changing their own lives—they were paving the way for equality, justice, and the right to safety for women everywhere. I knew this was where I needed to be. And I have never left this work since.

Over the years I have had great mentors and magic moments that inspired me. In many different domestic violence programs I have been a volunteer, a board member, a line staff, an activist. I have also done other things…like write a book and teach elementary school French and fight to put meaning behind the B in LGBT rights and became a mama. Somewhere in there—17 ½ years ago to be precise—I started Shalom Bayit, and in 2001 added “accidental E.D.” to my list of roles in this work. Mostly I have just done what I needed to do—and that drives me to keep moving forward. Fortunately, I am blessed to do this work about which I am so passionate, in the community that is my spiritual home. I am honored to witness the transformation and healing that women experience when they walk through our doors. I am touched by their willingness to share their deepest fears and private tears, and astounded by their seemingly endless capacity to find hope.

But working to end domestic violence is no easy task. The work is hard, and never ending. We never have enough time, staff, resources, or the magic wand to fix the problem. The stories are painful and battered women’s advocates must live with the excruciating fact that we cannot always make things better. We cannot always take the pain away; guarantee a woman’s safety; bring her children back; promise her they will be protected by the system. We cannot promise her that we’ll find space in a shelter tonight or that the courts will believe her or that she’ll be able to financially support herself and her four kids on her own. We cannot promise that if she leaves the divorce settlement will be fair and she will find peace. How then can advocates hear the horror stories and the pain day in and day out and not burn out? How can we walk away from our 100th unfair court ruling or take that next crisis line call without despairing?

There are things that make it possible to do more than just “keep going”—to actually keep loving.

(Continued on page 2)
what we do as activists and caring nonprofit professionals: to shine, and to be nourished as much as we give nourishment. I decided to give some thought to what has worked for me, and came up with a little list. So here are my Seven Secrets of Success, some of the key elements to sustaining activism over the long haul. YOU TOO can try this at home, with your own passions and career and great causes:

1. **Get Angry, but Do Something Constructive with It**
2. **Be Clear on What You Want to Change; and Have an Idea of How to Get There**
3. **Count Your Successes**
4. **Live in Balance**
5. **Have Fun**

1. **Get Angry, but Do Something Constructive with It.**

It is not enough to just complain about the way things are. Judaism is all about action—if we see injustice, it is incumbent upon us to create the change we want to see. And to believe that we can! Every moment of injustice can be transformed into your next strategy for tikkan olam, for repairing our world. Every spark of righteous rage can inspire action for change, if used wisely and respectfully. We might hear many stories of injustice that make us incredibly angry. But we can transform that anger into the motivation we need to TAKE ACTION, to channel our outrage in ways that create true and lasting change.

2. **Be Clear on What You Want to Change; and Have an Idea of How to Get There.**

Choose a strategy. Set a reasonable expectation for the change you want to see happen. I like to keep my eye on the big prize—like seeing an end to people misusing power, which is why Shalom Bayit is about social change and not just providing a service—while focusing on steps that are actually achievable in the foreseeable future. I call this **Think Big, Act Small.** That helps us not lose sight of our purpose, while also creating tangible change that we can see and taste and feel. It has to be do-able.

3. **Count Our Successes.**

If your goal is to save the redwood trees, don’t wait until we no longer cut down redwoods before you shout for joy. Instead, celebrate when you save one tree. Or when you change one mind. Or when one neighborhood store begins to sell recycled lumber. Or when you successfully forge one unlikely alliance.

Always remember to have glass-have-full moments, rejoicing in what you have accomplished even as you might still be aware of the long road ahead. I believe the real secret to my longevity is my insistence that we never, ever miss an opportunity to celebrate success.

4. **Look for Mentors and Magic Moments. Find Partners and Work Together.**

We can’t do this alone, and we shouldn’t have to. Partnerships give us strength & teach us many lessons & help us see things in new ways.

- Look for people who can mentor you in your work—people whose experience you can learn from, who are willing to sit with you and offer guidance, and who will share their own challenges as well as successes with you. Sometimes the challenges offer the most valuable learning.

- “Magic moments” are the inverse of teachable moments…they are our own “learnable moments.” These are the times when life unexpectedly gives us a challenge, a success, or an opportunity to see something in a new light. We can use these opportunities to become open to new ways of doing things; to validate the things we do that actually work; or to understand the impact of our work. When the unexpected wonderful result happens in your work, it’s time to celebrate—because, as we are reminded in #3 above, it’s so important to count our successes!

- Lastly, find partners and work together. Collaborations have their challenges, but working in collaboration ultimately makes all of our work stronger. If you choose your partners well, it’s always worth it. Shalom Bayit’s philosophy has always been to work with everybody—as many partners as we can in the community—because that is what ultimately has the most benefit for the women and children we serve.

5. **Be Present.**

If you’re fully present in the moment and can truly take in what is happening in your work or activism, then you experience everything with depth and meaning—the joys and the “oy’s”, the ups and the downs, your clients’ anguish and their profound transformation when they see something in a new light or find a moment of happiness. Crisis intervention work requires our utmost presence. When the helpline rings or a client in need drops in unexpectedly asking for help, we might be in the middle of an important project or on a deadline or about to go home. It is easy to feel overwhelmed by the unpredictable nature of this work. But the response of presence is to remember that this person who needs us is the very reason we are here, more so than the project deadline or my carefully planned timing of the day: this is the moment for which we must be present. On the last day in the office before our Creating Hope celebration there were moments like that all day long as we rushed about preparing for the big event: calls from the distraught mom whose adult daughter is in an abusive relationship, the woman who has long been away from her violent ex-husband but still wonders if she made the right decision, the new caller who just got the courage to call for help. Each time, we stopped and gave that person our full attention.

Presence means that when I am with you, I am really with you. And when I go home, I don’t take it with me. Yes, I might do work at home sometimes…don’t get me wrong; the revolution was not always won in a neat 40 hour work week. But I don’t take the STRESS home. I don’t let an unsolved problem keep me up at night, or worry that I didn’t do a good enough job or feel useless because today I didn’t end domestic violence. When we walk in the doors of our homes each evening it is time to be present with our families, our pets, ourselves. When we experience what is in front of us, we live so much more fully…we have so much more to give…and we can let go of what was in front of us earlier in the day or last week—so that we are making room for what is here now rather than hanging on to what was.

6. **Live in Balance.**

Balance has always been key for me. In the Kabbalistic view of the 10 sfirot, those essential qualities of our inner beings, each quality is set in balance with its counterpart. Wholeness comes when we achieve a balance, for example, between **chesed** (lovingkindness) and **gevurah** (judgment, wise discernment, or as my dear friend Shama would say, beautiful boundaries). Sustainability comes from a healthy balance between the two. Burnout happens when the scales tip too far to one side: Too much lovingkindness and we give ourselves away, caring for others at the expense of ourselves. Not enough lovingkindness and we can’t hold the compassion and generosity of spirit that is needed for the work—we lose our purpose. The same is true in intimate relationships. If we bring our full **chesed** or lovingkindness to our partner balanced with wise discernment and healthy boundaries, then we can love fully without losing ourselves. Then we can allow our hearts to break wide open and trust that we still have the inner resources to protect ourselves.

Founding an organization or pursuing something you believe in requires another form of balance that is beautifully mapped out through the sfirot: the balance between **Netzach** and ** Hod**, or between the spark that gets things going and the slow, steady perseverance that keeps it alive. As we cultivate the quality of Netzach which embodies “victory over obstacles”—a certain quality of audacity and confidence required to take those fiery leaps of faith or step into leadership—we must also maintain its equilibrium with the ability to trudge through the hard stuff over time and pace ourselves to persevere through it all.

7. **Have Fun While You’re Doing It.**

One of my heroes and role models has always been the brilliant feminist revolutionary activist Emma Goldman. The world that she envisioned and fought for would include not only righting the obvious injustices, but also every human being’s right to experience joy. Emma Goldman is often
Thank you!

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Sustaining Activism for the Long Haul

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quoted as saying “if I can’t dance, I don’t want to be part of your revolution.” She never actually said that verbatim, but the idea is definitely hers: those who seek to change the world can still have a darn good time doing that. And in fact we must, if we are to sustain the work. (Her actual statement was more complex, but it was a little too darn long for a t-shirt so it was shortened to the “famous” citation). Fighting loving, patient, diligent care of our own lives fully even while we fight poverty or unraveling racism or making our communities safe for same-sex couples or taking poisonous chemicals out of our children’s toys or just plain dreaming of peace – the revolution does not require us to stop living. In fact the opposite is true: to bring true tikkun olam we must live the world we want to see. If we want peace we must live peace – in our daily practice of how we interact with our coworkers, our partners, our parents, our children, yes even the incompetent clerk at the airline ticket counter. (OK maybe I need to practice that one a little more. I am from New York, after all.) If we want peace we have to live peacefully, and if we want others to experience their inalienable right to freedom and joy then we have to live joyfully. If I wish for someone to feel hopeful or grateful then I must practice the art of creating hope and being grateful. I must find hope in my own dark hours, and experience gratitude for even the small things, like the fact that I awoke this morning able to move my body and that I am blessed with enough food to eat, a safe place to live and a wonderful community of family and friends.

Emma Goldman is an exemplary model of how to be an activist: love fiercely, fight for what you believe in, and have a darn good time while you’re doing it. Why not dance and laugh and love our way through this very difficult task of working to end domestic violence? I for one intend to do that for at least the next 25 years.

Words of Inspiration: On Sustaining Leadership

“At 15, I was a client at the Center for Young Women’s Development, an organization that helps low-income young women transform their lives. By 19, I was the center’s executive director. Today, I am executive director of the Lawyers’ Committee for Civil Rights of the San Francisco Bay Area, an organization that focuses in the areas of race, economic justice and immigration.

When people ask, ‘How do you do it?’ I say that I’m not doing half the work my grandmother did. The women before me accepted nothing but the best, and I owe it to them to lead. Each and every one of us has the power to change the world. You can change the world. It may take you a bit longer and a lot more small steps than you expected, but you can do it.”

—Lateefah Simon, Oprah’s Top 20 Most Powerful Women of 2009

Thank you to all our contributors!
Shalom Bayit’s annual benefit, held at the historic Carnelian Room in San Francisco, raised over $57,000 to help break the cycle of abuse. Thanks to all who contributed to make this possible, and with 170 people in attendance for the auction and luncheon, together we celebrated the art of healing that Shalom Bayit brings to the Jewish community. The Board of Directors was pleased to honor our founding executive director Naomi Tucker for her 25 years of working to end domestic violence. We thank the community for coming out to celebrate with us, to honor Naomi’s important work and milestones, and to bring continued hope and healing to those affected by family violence.

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Thank you, Shalom Bayit volunteers & in-kind contributors!
26 Congregations Give Sermons on Domestic Violence

On October 30th-31st, twenty-six Bay Area rabbis and congregations—from Santa Rosa to San Jose—delivered a drash on domestic violence in the Jewish community as part of Shalom Bayit’s eighth annual “Shabbat Shalom” sermon campaign. This is the greatest number of congregations ever to participate in simultaneous sermons! The campaign asks community leaders to speak about abuse from the bimah and call for a true Shabbat Shalom—a Shabbat where peace reigns throughout our homes and families. The designated parsha this year was Lech L’cha, in which G-d tells Abraham and Sarah to “go forth” (lech lecha) “to a land that I will show you.” This theme of our ancestors—leaving behind the familiar and venturing forth into an unknown land—echoes today’s story of battered women and their children. We are so grateful to our wonderful rabbis for bringing light to this complex crossroads that abused women face: the difficult choice between familiar terror and a great unknown. When so many rabbis join together to speak out about abuse in Jewish homes, our community becomes a safer place—and congregants are more likely to feel comfortable approaching their rabbi if abuse is affecting their life or the life of a loved one.

**Tremendous thanks to participating synagogues:**

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**In celebration of our 18th anniversary, Shalom Bayit is pleased to announce:**

**Debbie Friedman**

**live in concert**

**Saturday, March 27th, 2010, 7pm**

San Francisco location

Please join us in song and celebration for a Passover musical extravaganza!

Advance tickets & Information: (510) 451-8874

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**NEW SUPPORT GROUP BEGINS IN PALO ALTO**

Thanks to support from the Jewish Community Endowment Newhouse Fund, Shalom Bayit and the Bay Area Jewish Healing Center launched a new spiritual support group this fall for women on the Peninsula in need of our services. The group provides peer support, education, counseling, and Jewish spiritual healing to women coping with unhealthy/abusive relationships, including issues of divorce, parenting and safety planning. Held in Palo Alto, the group is co-led by Rabbi Elishava Salamo and Shalom Bayit’s regional counselor Annie Goldstein.

The group is part of our Peninsula services expansion plan begun last year with the opening of our satellite office, serving the growing Peninsula Jewish community with vital services to families in crisis.

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**A FOND FAREWELL**

We are sorry to say goodbye to Shalom Bayit’s wonderful community educator Rachel Marder, who has been with us for more than a year leading educational programs on domestic violence throughout the Bay Area. Rachel is off to pursue studies at the Pardes Institute in Israel. We wish her well!

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**Love Shouldn’t Hurt**

The Youth Program at Shalom Bayit

Love Shouldn’t Hurt workshops reach adolescents & young adults with dating violence prevention & healthy relationships education. In 2009 we have already reached over 750 teens, parents, & educators! This year we debuted our college toolkit for Hillel campuses as a companion to our successful national curriculum, thanks to support from The Hadassah Foundation. For more information or to schedule a workshop, contact teen@shalom-bayit.org

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**A Wish List:**

Flat screen computer monitor, food gift cards (Safeway, Albertsons’, or Trader Joe’s), curtains, Powerpoint projector, small TV & DVD player, phone cards, kiddie couch, 4-drawer locking file cabinet, silverware, dishes, dishwasher, household goods, office supplies, and used cell phones.

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