

# Misery beyond the Mezzuzah

## Relationship Abuse in the Jewish Community

by Letty Cottin Pogrebin

a woman is battered every 15 seconds in the U.S. Domestic violence is the leading cause of injury to women. More than one in four North American women will experience abuse at some point in her life and, as we know, Jews are not immune—whether we're Orthodox, unaffiliated, or anything in between. Bromides such as “Jewish men don't batter,” or “Jewish men make the best husbands,” or “Jewish families are safe havens in a hostile world,” are about as true as “There are no Jewish alcoholics.”

Socioeconomic advantage allows some men to commit relationship crimes without suffering the legal consequences. The fact is middle- or upper-class men (which describes most Jewish men) are far less likely to be accused or convicted of battering. They serve less time in jail, and where there are alternative sentences available, such as mandatory batterers' re-education groups, they are frequently sentenced to those or are allowed to seek private therapeutic help.

Faye Wilbur, a social worker who serves the Orthodox community in Boro Park, New York, told me, “Abusive men present well. They're charming to everyone but their wives and when the wife threatens to expose their abusive behavior, they say ‘No one will believe you.’ Often they're right.”

Sadly, in our community, horrendous acts of violence and sexual abuse occur behind closed doors, even those with *mezzuzot* on their doorposts. The Sages viewed the mezzuzah as an appeal to divine protection, a symbol of God's saving the Israelites from the tenth plague. But protection is hard to come by for the women cowering behind those doors, certain that they are the only Jews being brutalized in the place where they are supposed to be most safe.

Whatever their religious and ethnic background, some men hurt women and children not just because males tend to be physically stronger and economically autonomous, but because—despite feminism's best efforts—male dominance is still an entrenched cultural assumption.

The more patriarchal the family, the more likely the abuse of women. Where there is privilege, there is power. Likewise, where there is dependency there is powerlessness—for instance, when a wife has no control over family money, or when a husband's mistreatment of his wife gives the children permission to disrespect or bully their mother. To break the cycle of abuse, we must restructure the patriarchal family into a social arrangement based on equality, democracy, and financial parity. And we must challenge rigid sex role socialization in the home and school, and dysfunctional paradigms of male supremacy and female subordination—especially those that equate masculinity with dominance and femininity with submission.

Feminists and other anti-violence advocates have “de-normalized” men's use of force to control women. They have also deconstructed men's excuses. When a man says his partner pushes his buttons and makes him see red or makes him lose it, they say “If your rage is so uncontrollable, how come you don't punch people out at the office? If you can't control it, how come when you're slamming your wife against the wall, you always manage to stop before you leave marks, break bones, or kill her?”

The big question remains: Why do some women tolerate abuse? Often it is not because they're masochists or weaklings but because they're fierce protectors of the family, and the perpetrator has threatened to hurt or take away their children if the wife resists or leaves. Crime statistics suggest it can be even more dangerous to leave than to stay: domestic violence victims are at greatest risk of being killed in the period immediately after they walk out. Other women simply do not want to end the relationship, they just want to make it work. “Don't jail him, fix him,” they say.

While religious women of all faiths tend to stay in abusive relationships longer than women of other groups, observant

A victim of anti-Semitism gets **more attention** than a woman whose husband **smacks her around in her own kitchen.**

