

Shabbat Shalom 2006

(A sabbatical from domestic violence)

Shalom Bayit sample sermon

Kedoshim (Leviticus 19:1 – 20:27)

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The Torah portion we read this Shabbat is Kedoshim, a central portion in Leviticus. Kedoshim means “holiness-es” in the plural—in other words, things that are holy. It is a part of the Torah that speaks to commandments that define what is holy and unholy—essentially a long list of Jewish ethics. It is our mandate to conduct the life of the community with holiness.

We often speak of ways that we should conduct ourselves with holiness in the public sphere. But we may not take as much time to talk about what goes on “behind closed doors,” in the privacy of one’s home and family life. I would like us to take this opportunity to consider whether our inner lives reflect the outer holiness that we strive to attain as a community.

[If you are a member of Shalom Bayit’s Rabbinic Advisory Council, this may be an opportune moment to mention your affiliation and the work the RAC has done to help address domestic violence in our community.]

This week we are observing a community wide calling for true *Shabbat Shalom* – a Sabbath of peace—in our homes and families. The call for a respite from violence and abuse within the family comes from a local organization, Shalom Bayit, that focuses on preventing and responding to abuse in Jewish homes. Shalom Bayit and its 40-member Rabbinic Advisory Council are asking congregations throughout the Bay Area this weekend to recognize the problem of domestic violence, and to do what we can to become involved in helping to prevent abuse. We at _____ are pleased to join more than two dozen other congregations this Shabbat in calling for an end to the communal scourge of domestic violence.

Domestic violence knows no boundary of religion, race, ethnicity, sexual orientation, age, ability, or socioeconomic status. Studies in Jewish communities around the country have shown that 20 - 30 percent of Jewish households experience abuse, the same rate as the non-Jewish population. So look around, and know that in this sanctuary tonight, there are people who have been abused; there are abusers; there are people who witnessed abuse between their parents; there are many of you who know someone who has been abused.

This is not holy behavior. This is not Jewish behavior. But it is happening, right here in our midst. And sometimes the abusers are people we know and love: your neighbor, best friend, cousin, golf partner, religious school instructor, or committee leader. Often women will tell me, “he’s such a *macher* in the community...no one will believe me.” And no one does.

Domestic violence is an escalating, intentional pattern of power and control which one person in the relationship consistently has control, and the other person lives in fear. It may involve physical violence, verbal or emotional abuse, financial control, or sexual abuse. It may leave bruises, or only invisible scars. It almost always happens at home, in secret, with no witnesses.

Being abused by the one who you believed loved you more than anyone else in the world is an unimaginable betrayal that leaves its permanent damaging mark on our psyches.

So if we turn to the parsha, what can we learn about how we can respond to this alarming unholy behavior in our midst?

Kedoshim begins with G-d telling Moses to tell the children of Israel: “Ye shall be holy, for I the Lord your G-d am holy”

We are thus told not only to lead a holy life, but to be holy *because* G-d is holy—in other words, we are called upon to act in the image of the divine. This brings us back to one of the first creation statements in Genesis, that we are all created in the image of G-d.

What does that mean? It means that every human being contains a spark of the divine; that each of us is blessed and beautiful; that every soul is holy and worthy; that divine presence is not only above us but within each of us. It also means that each of us is a mirror for God’s law and values, and we must each take it upon ourselves to reflect divine acts and *mitzvot* in our daily lives.

A biblical commandment well-known to most of us appears in the center of this torah portion: Lev 19:16—*al ta’amod al dam re’echa*—‘do not stand idly by the blood of your neighbor.’

We have often understood this commandment as a strong calling against the common public pattern of turning a blind eye to domestic violence, the notion that the “fight next door” is just a private, family matter and should be ignored. But this commandment is only the second half of a sentence. The full quote contains another well-known Jewish ethic, which is the prohibition against *lashon hara*. It reads: “Thou shalt not be a gossipmonger among thy people; neither shalt thou stand idly by the blood of thy neighbor.” Let’s look at that for a moment.

The first part—a warning against gossip—is the prohibition against *lashon hara*, or speaking evil of someone. We are not supposed to spread gossip, speak cruelly of someone or defame someone’s character in the community. But in the same sentence, it is juxtaposed with the commandment of not standing idly when someone is hurt. In other words, Judaism teaches us to hold life’s paradoxes in balance. The Torah says that we should not gossip indiscriminately about one another, that we should not talk about others in ways that might bring them harm. But in the same sentence the Torah tells us that we must make a big exception to this if someone is being hurt. In fact we are commanded to do something. The Torah doesn’t specify what we are to do...just that it is our moral and holy obligation to do something if our neighbor’s blood is being shed. Because our greatest obligation, after all, is *pikuach nefesh*—to save a life. So if it actually would harm someone to remain silent, then our obligation is to speak out. We are collectively responsible for the well-being of our community.

There are times when a person is obligated to speak out, even though the information is disparaging. Specifically, if a person’s intent in sharing the negative information is for a *to’elet*, a positive, constructive, and beneficial purpose, the prohibition against *lashon hara* does not apply. Lies and slander are always prohibited. But if the *lashon hara* serves as a warning against the possibility of future harm, such communication is not only permissible, but, under certain conditions it is compulsory.

Commentators maintain that the distinction between derogatory speech that is solely detrimental and derogatory speech that serves a helpful purpose derives from the biblical verse itself. They point to the juxtaposition of the two clauses of the verse, “You shall not go up and down as a slanderer among your people” and “nor you shall stand by the blood of your neighbor” (Lev. 19:16) and note that although there is a prohibition of defamation (clause 1),

that prohibition is overridden by the obligation to save another or to testify in his behalf (clause 2). Thus, the verse should be read, “You shall not go up and down as a slanderer among your people; but, nevertheless, you shall not stand by the blood of your neighbor (and you must speak out in order to prevent harm).” This obligation includes protection not only from physical harm, but protection from monetary and spiritual harm as well.

Rambam codifies this reading as a matter of law:

Anyone who can save another and does not save him violates, “You shall not stand on the blood of your neighbor.” Therefore, one who sees his friend drowning in the sea or being attacked by robbers and is able to save him; or if he hears that others are conspiring to harm him and have set a trap, and he does not reveal this information to him, he violates that which is said in the Torah, “You shall not stand on the blood of your neighbor.”

(from Rabbi Mark Dratch, J-Safe)

Sometimes, a good idea goes wrong. Sometimes the prohibition against *lashon hara* gives people the idea that a person who has been harmed by another member of the community cannot speak about what was done to them, or saying anything about the person who harmed them. Does this follow the *kavanah* or intent of the *lashon hara* prohibition? As we noted, if the telling serves a purpose, as in preventing future harm, then it is not *lashon hara* – it is one’s duty to speak out.

How many of us have debated whether a young child witnessing a conflict on the playground should come to us to report the incident or whether that is “tattling”? How do we distinguish when someone should reach out for help or “work it out” on their own? The distinction made in the Torah between not spreading gossip and not standing idly is that if someone is being harmed, we are compelled to “tell.”

In the case of domestic violence, if a victim is silenced from telling their truth about what their partner did to them, further harm may come to that person. And if the person who harmed her continues to say unpleasant things about her within the community—why should she then be silenced for speaking her truth?

Often people don’t want to hear women tell their stories of being abused by a partner. We don’t want to hear because we can’t believe it’s true, or because the stories are so painful, or because we don’t want to hurt the reputation of the accused. Silence perpetuates the abuse. Denying that abuse exists, preventing a victim from speaking their truth, or turning a blind eye, are ways of preventing people from getting help. Abuse usually happens behind closed doors, so in fact we don’t see it—and we may not be able to “know” what happened. In public, someone’s abuser may appear to be the most wonderful person: the head of three committees in the congregation, a volunteer at Sunday school, everybody’s best friend.

We must remind ourselves that the warning against *lashon ha’ra* is not an excuse to avoid action if injustice is taking place around us. It is not meant to silence victims. Victims need to tell their story—and speak their truth—for the healing and safety of the community, as well as their own *r’fuah shlemah* from the pain and injustice they have experienced. It is our imperative, then, to listen—to listen so that we know the difference between “indiscriminate gossip” and one who is simply telling their story.

So if we are not to stand idly by, how can we act to intervene when we know someone is being harmed? Can we really make a difference?

Margaret Mead said: “Never doubt that a small group of thoughtful, committed citizens can change the world. Indeed, it is the only thing that ever has.”

There are many things we can do—both as individuals and as a community—to “not stand idly by” on the issue of domestic violence.

Individually, we can be a good friend to one who confides that they are being abused. We can listen, and believe, and provide support. We can take safety issues seriously. But also we need to confront our own places of discomfort. Look around you. Imagine for a moment that you find out that the person sitting next to you is abusing their partner. What will you do? Do you know them well? Is this a friend? Can you believe it? Who will you believe? Will this change your friendship? Can you remain friends with both the abuser and the abused? What does that mean for the safety—or trust—of the abused person? It is really uncomfortable to think about this. But it is the work that we must do if we want to stop violence.

As a community, we need to strategize to be able to handle actual situations as they come up within our congregation. The Jewish community around the country is doing many creative things to confront abuse. Some synagogues have started a domestic violence committee; some offer training to staff, clergy and lay leaders on how to respond if abuse happens. Here at _____, some things we have done include [putting stickers in women’s restrooms with Shalom Bayit’s phone number; creating educational programs for children and adults; discussing teen dating violence; addressing the issue from the bima as we’re doing right now; sending support to Shalom Bayit.]

Our community is blessed with many magnificent, generous, dedicated, concerned individuals and groups who find ways to give to others around them. Some have organized kosher food for a battered woman and her children, or gathered gifts for them at Chanukah, or helped shelter her in the comfort of friends. We can hold donation drives, fundraisers, mitzvah project days, awareness campaigns, or even start a domestic violence committee. Together we can build tangible solutions to ending domestic violence.

Shalom Bayit supports women who have been abused, and helps them restore safety and justice in their lives. You can be a part of that support network too. All of us can send a clear message to those who are abused in their home that we are here to provide support and safety; and a message to abusers that our community will not tolerate such behavior. So, beginning right now, on this Shabbat, we say: *not* in our congregation. We will *not* stand idly by. We *will* make a difference.

Thank you. Shabbat Shalom.