

Temple Beth Jacob Rosh Chodesh Group (May 31, 2009)

Good morning, everyone. *Rosh Chodesh Sivan sameach*. Thank you so much for inviting me to speak to your group about Shalom Bayit and the work that we do to end partner abuse in the Jewish community and create a communal response to this issue.

In *The Book of Blessings*, Marcia Falk writes that *rosh chodesh* is a time for personal reflection and self-renewal. The word “*chodesh*”, month, comes from the same root as “*chadash*”, meaning new. It’s wonderful that Judaism gives us the opportunity to renew ourselves, or start anew, each month.

Ruth and Naomi, two female characters whom we just read about over Shavuot, are each starting out on a new journey, a different chapter in their lives. Like Ruth and Naomi, we at Shalom Bayit work with women in all stages of life, in many stages of relationships. Some are recently coming out of an abusive relationship, others are in the midst of one, others are healing from relationships that may have ended years ago and still others are trying to define what may be unhealthy in their relationships. We offer these women crisis counseling, spiritual healing support groups, financial assistance, legal advice and referrals to shelters. But most of all we listen to the women who come to Shalom Bayit, believe them, and offer support in whatever way they need. We also work with friends and family members who have concerns about their loved ones relationships, and provide counseling to rabbis about how to spiritually advise their congregants on these issues. Sometimes challenging conflicts arise: which parent can pick up the children from Hebrew school, one parent feels unsafe or uncomfortable with another parent’s presence at a bar mitzvah. We help a client advocate for herself and work with the rabbi to reach a compromise on these matters.

When Shalom Bayit first started to raise the issue of domestic violence in the Jewish community 17 years ago, not many Jews were interested in listening. They simply didn’t think this was a problem Jews face. While this myth still exists, the community has become much more receptive to Shalom Bayit and to the fact that domestic violence occurs at about the same rate in the Jewish community as it does in all other religious, socioeconomic, sexual orientation and racial groups—at about 20 to 30 percent. We like to think of ourselves as different in this regard, but unfortunately partner abuse affects everyone. Our image of the survivor is just that, an image, not reality.

Like Ruth and Naomi, many of our clients are looking to start over or make changes in their lives. During this very difficult transition, they need the support of their community and loved ones. Ruth cleaves to Naomi, saying, “Wherever you go, I will go. Wherever you lodge, I will lodge. Your people will be my people. Your G-d will be my G-d.” Together, Ruth and Naomi build a support base for one another. Both are recovering from great loss and personal sadness.

Their friendship is their survival tool, it keeps them going. That is in essence the Shalom Bayit model as well. Let me explain.

In nearly all abusive relationships, the abuser seeks to isolate their partner from friends, family and community. They minimize and deny what's going on, and blame everyone around them for their actions—everyone except themselves. A person is easier to control when she is alone, living in fear or with threats and frequent put downs. At Shalom Bayit, we break this isolation by helping our clients either find or re-establish communities for themselves through synagogue-life and our support groups. Undoing the isolation is a huge piece of what we do as it helps survivors take control of their lives.

Through our community education programs, we are also undoing the isolation survivors feel. Every time we speak to a group, there is always someone who identifies personally or knows someone today or in their past who was abused.

We also use Jewish values to create a communal response. For instance, we frequently combine Jewish holidays and the topic of domestic violence. Every *Sukkot* we send synagogues purple ribbons to hang in honor and memory of survivors, and once a year on Shabbat we ask rabbis to speak on the topic of domestic violence, and call for a true shalom bayit for all.

We are also starting to work with synagogues on applying the concept of *teshuvah* toward a former abuser who wishes to return to the community. In this week's Torah portion, *Naso*, G-d explains how we can return after a serious wrong doing. G-d instructs Moses and the Israelites that "when a man or woman commits any wrong toward a fellow man, thus breaking faith with the Lord, and that person realizes his guilt, he shall confess the wrong that he has done. He shall make restitution in the principal amount and add one-fifth to it, giving it to him whom he has wronged" (Lev. 5:6-7). Admitting the wrong doing, taking responsibility and making restitution are all key components from the text that we apply today.

Together we are undoing the myth that domestic violence doesn't affect us, by reaching 1,000 teenagers in our youth prevention workshops last year, over 600 adults in our community education program this year, running a 65-member rabbinic advisory council and currently working with about 96 clients.

The most important thing we can do for one another is listen---if we suspect that someone we know is being abused (physically, emotionally or verbally), it's important that we speak up, if it's safe to do so. We are taught never to stand idly by the blood of our neighbor and to always treat each person as a child of G-d, *b'tzelem elohim*, in the image of G-d.

Checking in with one another, letting someone know we care about them and expressing concern goes a long way. You can also support our clients at Shalom Bayit by donating Safeway

gift cards, helping prepare Hanukah or Passover baskets for Jewish women and children living in shelter and extending financial support to us.

Let us renew in ourselves this month of *Sivan* a commitment to one another and to fostering a community free of abuse, a true shalom bayit.