

***Drasha for Parashat VaYera:
Domestic Violence and Becoming a Sukkat Shalom***
By Rivka Greenberg, Shalom Bayit Board of Directors
October, 2013

As I say to all of you, Shabbat Shalom, the meaning of the phrase is doubled this morning.

"*Shabbat Shalom*" is indeed the traditional greeting on this day of Shabbat. But my presence here today is also because of "The Shabbat Shalom Campaign" of Shalom Bayit, our Bay Area's local agency working to prevent domestic violence in the Jewish community. Shalom Bayit has asked that all synagogues incorporate a drash on domestic violence in October to support Domestic Violence awareness month. Full disclosure - I am not only a member of Netivot Shalom; I am also the board chair of Shalom Bayit.

In this drash, I am inviting you to use what for some of you will be different lenses to think about this parasha, and perhaps if it works for you, to use it with other parshiot as well.

We generally think of a lens as something we use to help us see, but it can be used for so much more - to support our other senses as well as our understanding. Once our awareness is heightened using new lenses, we may speak, see, feel, hear and understand in ways that are different than before. Here are two examples.

One: in a college class that I taught in the Midwest in the 90's, I gave the students the word family and asked them to use stick figures to draw a family. The immediate reaction of $\frac{3}{4}$ of the students was to draw 2 children, and a male and female parent. Through discussion their lens of understanding of what can constitute a family changed.

Two: Let's similarly look at the phrase "Shalom Bayit". The literal translation is "Peace in the home." As the Shalom Bayit website says: The concept of Shalom Bayit has traditionally been used to force women into submissive, "peacekeeping" roles within the family, often sacrificing their emotional and physical safety for the sake of maintaining an external image of the perfect Jewish family. [Shalom Bayit chooses to reclaim these words as our name](#), in the spirit of returning to the original meaning of peace in the home: a home and family who are loving, respectful, and violence-free. We are dedicated to the empowerment of battered women and their children, as well as to challenging abuse in its many forms.

Some of the words that I will be saying this morning are painful - but they are all too often what happens in real life. We know that 1 in 4 women and girls will be abused in their lifetimes and that violence against women and violence in general is a public health problem. Violence is one of the top 10 leading causes of death, with domestic violence accounting for over 1000 deaths a year. This week I heard in the news of 2 teen deaths associated with bullying. But the topic is more than a public health problem it is an ethical concern.

My personal minhag (custom), building on the minhag I established with my daughters for their bat mitzvahs, is that the sources I use in a drasha are all from women. Women's voices and wisdom have too often been excluded in our tradition.

The parshat hashavua, Vayera (Genesis 18:1 - 22:24) is full of descriptions of family dynamics - and many troubling descriptions of violence against women. I would like to do some text study of the parasha, using two perspectives. The first is using examples of domestic violence. But to use only that perspective would be a disservice to our tradition. So the second perspective will be using change, tikkun olam/social action.

In this parasha we find these domestic violence traits:

(1) Underlying belief in one's superiority over another and

(2) tactics such as intimidation, threats, control, emotional abuse, physical violence and sexual harassment/assault

Let's begin with a particularly unpleasant story in chapter 19. Two angels come to visit Lot in Sodom. They say they will spend the night in the village square, but Lot graciously invites them to his home instead. When the villagers demand that Lot release the men so they can rape them, we read in verse 8: Lot says:

"I beg you, my friends, do not commit such a wrong. Look, I have two daughters who have not known a man. Let me bring them out to you, and you may do to them as you please; but do not do anything to these men, since they have come under the shelter of my roof."

Where are the women's voices in this? Where and by whom are the women empowered to resist being raped? Why would Lot think the rape of a woman would be any less awful than the rape of a man and that it wasn't ok for the townspeople to abuse the male guests, but it was perfectly ok for them to do the same thing with his daughters? The parsha proceeds to a story of date rape, though a gender-twisting version: After the destruction of Sodom and Gomorrah and the death of Lot's wife, these same traumatized daughters are afraid that they are the only people left alive in the world and get their father drunk so that he will sleep with them - the victim in this case is a man. *These are very disturbing stories.*

Next let's look at chapter 20 where Abraham and Sarah go to where Abimelech is king. Abraham is afraid that Abimelech, will desire Sarah, so instead of admitting that they are husband and wife, Abraham calls Sarah his sister, making her fair game for the king. We are told in 20:2 Abraham said of Sarah his wife, "She is my sister." So King Abimelech had Sarah brought to him. Abraham used his power to control Sarah and put her in harm's way so that he would not be harmed.

The last example is in chapter 21, the story of Hagar and Ishmael. This story is fresh in our minds from Rosh Hashana. In verse 14, we read: And Abraham arose up early in the morning, and took bread and a bottle of water, and gave it unto Hagar, putting it on her shoulder, and the child, and sent her away; and she departed, and strayed in the wilderness of Beer-sheba.

Abraham consciously did actions that caused harm to Hagar and Ishmael - to name them - spouse abuse and child abuse including shunning/isolation. How common this story is today. Any day we can open the newspaper or computer and read of people abandoning/harming

their partner and children, refusing to pay alimony and child support, wanting to disappear from responsibility.

This parasha gives us plenty of examples of domestic abuse. There is a clear intent to harm in the story of Ishmael, Hagar and Abraham. There is an ongoing pattern of power and control of Abraham over his wife Sarah when he pimped her to Abimelech. There is silence from the victim: Sarah as she is offered to Abimelech, the daughters of Lot as they are offered to the townspeople, Hagar as she and her son are being tossed to a certain death. These stories in our parsha are indeed upsetting to hear and to read but for some of us, they are mirrors of things we have watched or been involved in.

But by looking at the parasha through a second lens, the lens of change - we can participate in interrupting the cycle of abuse.

Dr. Judith Plaskow has provided a commentary on this parasha in the book, *Torah a Women's Commentary*. She says:

"This Torah portion makes clear that our ancestors are by no means always models of ethical behavior that edify and inspire us. On the contrary, often the Torah holds up a mirror to the ugliest aspects of human nature and human society. It provides us with opportunities to look honestly at ourselves and the world we have created, to reflect on destructive patterns of human relating, and to ask how we might address and change them."

This introduces the concept of *tikkun ha'olam* - repairing the world.

Lot, his wife and daughters are very prominent in this parasha and many of the actions of each of them are very controversial. The word Lot - *lamed vav tet* - means cover. I wonder if we could use the lens of change to uncover what is happening in this parsha and see what we can do to bring *tikkun olam* to the world around us.

Identifying what has been done, what has been allowed to be done is important - but reframing it to look not just at what happened -but to look at what can be changed to correct the situation, keeps us from being rooted to the past. Many of you are parents, grandparents or teachers of children. -What we often do with children is to tell them what not to do. The baby uses her new found amazing abilities of reaching and touching - and reaches for this wonderful thing- the electric outlet - which was placed right at the level of a crawling baby. This, as a child development specialist I can say, is actually developmentally appropriate for the child to do. As an intervention - because children that age are not aware of safety, we would say - don't touch that - which would account for immediate safety concern but not give the child the tools or understanding for self care and growth. What actually might work better is tell the child what TO DO in addition to dealing with the safety issue.

At the beginning of this drash - I identified examples of emotional and physical violence in this parasha. The key question is how can this millennial-long pattern be changed? Like the example with the baby - What can we do? I submit that change will not happen by one action but many and more specifically by many people individually and as a community, both here at Netivot Shalom and in society in general, to alter the way we have done things in the past.

As Naomi Tucker, executive director of Shalom Bayit has said, we have guidance from our tradition and the ability to create change - what can we do - Some examples include:

Repair the world, tikkun olam - Rabbi Jill Jacobs has commented that Tikkun ha'olam includes our own actions as contributing to the process of fixing large societal problems thus contributing to the greater human and divine world

Continue to redefine peace in the home to be for all. Look around at your family, at your work, at your friends. Are there relationships of inequality? Is someone afraid to speak up? Is there intent to harm? An ongoing pattern of power and control? A silent victim? Disbelief of a victim's cries for help? Do you see this in yourself? Do you have the courage to speak if you see this behavior in others?

Leviticus 19:16 tells us: "Do not stand idly by the blood of thy neighbor" - That means **we cannot view domestic violence as a "private, family matter."** We are actually called upon to do something / take action if we know someone is being harmed. Sometimes that might be providing sanctuary for the person being abused - which could be a physical place to go or a conversation on the other end of a phone line. Sometimes that might be accountability: calling your friend or relative or neighbor on the carpet if they are mistreating their loved ones. We must all ask ourselves: what will we do if....

Our community can set standards for acceptable behaviors. At this point there is only one synagogue in the greater bay area, Kehilla which has a policy on abuse. As a community we need to explore - educate ourselves on how we can have Netivot Shalom not only be a path to peace but become a shelter of peace Sukkat shalom - for those who are being harmed - turn words into actions

We need to work on creating culture shifts and change beliefs - We as community members can question negative cultural values and statements - where do they come from - find ways to say something when you hear statements like - I will kill you for doing; boys will be boys, "wife beaters," t-shirts, and other examples of machismo and sexism

Returning to the parasha - this time from the perspective of tikkun olam. This parsha has a beautiful story of advocacy. For 13 verses in chapter 18 Abraham tries very hard to convince God not to destroy Sodom. We all need to learn different ways to stand up for what we believe in. And we can borrow language from verse 17 chapter 21.

When Hagar has been banished by Abraham, we read:

"And God heard the voice of the lad; and the angel of God called to Hagar out of heaven, and said unto her: 'What aileth thee, Hagar? fear not; for God hath heard the voice of the lad where he is."

The Torah provides us with examples of how speaking out can end silencing and create change. When we stop being silent by-standers, it is not just the victim that is being helped, but we are taking action - contributing to tikkun olam.

Shalom Bayit's mission is to foster the social change and community response necessary to eradicate domestic violence in the Jewish community. We provide support to survivors, prevention education and training for teens and young adults through our Love Shouldn't Hurt program, and work with the community on abuse prevention, including an 80 member rabbinical advisory council, of which many rabbis here are members.

I would like to read this mishaberach written by the Jewish Women International's clergy task force that addresses the needs of families touched by domestic violence.

May the One who blessed our ancestors Sarah, Rebecca, Leah and Rachel, and Abraham, Isaac and Jacob, provide protection, compassion, care and healing for all those who have known violence and abuse within their families. May those who have been harmed find pathways to understanding and wholeness - and those who have caused harm find their way to repentance and peace. May our community be a source of support for those who have suffered in silence or shame. May those whose homes have become places of danger find their way to a sukkat shalom, a shelter of safety and let us say Amen.

