



Charades

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Q. In “Charades,” the couple does manage to get back together with the appropriate boundaries in place so the abuse will not recur. In reality, how often does such a scenario take place? What would a woman need to do to reach this place? How can she know if her husband is capable of change (like Mottie) or if she should get out because he’ll never change (like Phil, Mottie’s father)?

Responding is Lisa Twerski, LCSW, who has been working with victims of domestic violence for over twenty years. She is on the board of directors of Nefesh, maintains a private practice in Brooklyn, and lectures locally and nationally. She is currently working on a book for victims of domestic violence in the frum community entitled, I’m So Confused, Am I Being Abused?

The question of how to end the abuse is a very important one. First, because there is much confusion around what can possibly bring about change in cases of domestic abuse; and second, because, in over twenty years of my working with victims of domestic abuse, almost everyone only wanted to know from me how they could keep their marriage, but end the abuse. This was the goal of the overwhelming majority of people in this situation.

Understanding domestic abuse, in brief: In cases of domestic abuse (as opposed to cases of extreme dysfunction between the couple, personality disorders, other mental health issues, etc., which are sometimes confused with domestic abuse), the abuser has an unwavering belief in his entitlement to power and control in his marriage. Due to the fact that what is at the heart of the problem is a faulty (and egregious) belief system, and not a mental health issue or a dynamic between the couple, the approach to change needs to be different than what might be employed if it were one of these two other issues.

This belief system is one that the abuser has complete faith in and is completely comfortable with. Such interventions as having an authority figure talk to the abuser about how his behavior is not proper, or working with a mental health

professional to explore the roots of the abuse, will not, by themselves, move the abuser to where he needs to go to make long-lasting change.

So what is the formula for change? In the case of domestic abuse, the first thing that we need to understand about change is that without an external motivating factor — a consequence to the abuser for continuing to be abusive — no lasting change will take place. Remember, the abuser is comfortable in his controlling, dominating role. Without something making it uncomfortable to stay that way, there’s not much hope for change.

What makes up a plan for change? Let’s turn our attention back to the story in “Charades,” which is actually a good example of what a plan for change should look like. As was mentioned, it’s key to have an external consequence that motivates the abuser to want to change his behavior. (What that consequence is will change from situation to situation.) In the case of Gila and Mottie, Mottie was motivated by the consequence that he was not going to be allowed back into the house until he made real change. What the story of Gila and Mottie also illustrates is the second important factor in a plan for change, which is a coordinated response.

A coordinated response means that everyone who is going to play a role in intervening needs to be on the same page and ready to stay consistent with the plan for change. Usually a plan like this involves the woman herself, her therapist, and her support system: perhaps her *nuv*, or her family, and sometimes his family. Everyone has to have the same message for the abuser: your behavior is unacceptable; this is the consequence until you make real, long-lasting change.


This process cannot be short-circuited. There is a process that a woman needs to go through with her therapist and eventually the abusive spouse, to make sure she’s seeing real change and not just a change of tactics. And the consequence doesn’t go away unless the woman sees that genuine change has taken place.

Anyone in this process who strays from the team approach can unfortunately sabotage the process.

In the “Charades” story, it was Gila herself who “removed the consequence” too early out of her own internal feelings of pressure, pity (for Mottie), or perhaps fear (of societal approval). Sometimes, however, the pressure to short-circuit the process comes from well-meaning friends, family members, or others, and what happened in the case of Gila and Mottie is typical. When Mottie came home because he was able to manipulate his way back in, and *not* because he had made enough changes, he fairly quickly resumed his old behaviors. Unfortunately, in many cases this becomes the “last straw” for the woman and the marriage ends there. In Gila’s case, she went back to trying for change with the appropriate setup, and was able to see enough true change in Mottie to enable her to stick with her “plan” to stay married.

In my mind, the real questions aren’t “How many abusers can change?” and “Which ones are they?” We can’t know that. The real question we, as potential people in someone’s support system, should ask if faced with this situation is, “Are we helping this person have the best possible chance to see change in her marriage or are we getting in the way, possibly unwittingly sabotaging the plan for change, even while we think we are helping?” Until we have seen many more cases where all of the elements necessary for change are present, which is *not* common, we can’t really know how likely change is.

A final word, about safety: The most important thing to remember when trying for change, or if you’re trying to be helpful to someone who’s being abused, is that safety has to come first. Before any intervention is considered, the person who is being abused should be encouraged to judge whether it sounds safe to her. The spouse of an abuser is the one in the best position to determine this, and her guidance and approval needs to be given priority in any plan for change.



Q. What is the *rav*'s role in helping couples who suffer from domestic abuse?

Responding is Rabbi Dovid Weinberger shlita, the rav of Congregation Shaaray Tefila. He is the halachic advisor for Hatzalah of the Five Towns and Shalom Task Force, and has lectured around the country on domestic abuse with a strong emphasis on rabbinic training.

What's important to understand is that domestic abuse is a new dynamic emerging in the *frum* community. Many *rabbanim* are very adept at dealing with *shalom bayis* issues, such as couples who disagree constantly on how to best parent their children, or have frequent arguments on how to spend money. Abuse, however, is a regular pattern of behavior wherein a spouse is being controlled, repressed, manipulated, or hurt.

Ten years ago, in a certain city in New York, a woman who had separated from her husband told her *rav* that she was afraid to go back after being threatened with her life. The *rav* told the woman that she was obligated to go back to her husband, and he promised to speak to the husband on her behalf. What the *rav* said to the abusive husband we don't know. That night she went back to him and, *nebach*, she's not with us anymore.

Yes, it's uncommon, but the fact that this story happened shows how a well-meaning *rav* has to also be experienced and knowledgeable in what he is dealing with. *Rabbanim* need training in handling abuse, just like they get training and experience in other areas. Shalom Task Force runs a wonderful training program for *rabbanim* in many cities across the United States, which gives a halachic overview of physical, emotional, psychological, financial, and other forms of spousal abuse.

A couple or an aggrieved wife seeking help with domestic abuse should call an abuse hotline to get a referral to a *rav* with expertise in this area. Practically speaking, *rabbanim* who have been properly trained understand that a woman is not allowed, according to Torah law, to be abused in any way at all. The hallmark of a Torah marriage

is *kavod*, respect. Demeaning, denigrating, and controlling behaviors are the antithesis of a Torah-mandated relationship, and we must certainly insist that these behaviors stop immediately. Therefore, the *rav* will outline a plan of action that should be followed to keep the woman safe and stop the abusive behavior. "Safe" does not just mean physically protected; she must be protected emotionally and psychologically as well. The right *rav* will never ask an abused woman, "What did you do to deserve it?" when she describes the way she is being abused. There is never a legitimate excuse for abuse.

A *rav* also must advise a woman about the halachos surrounding her situation; halachah sanctions a woman's existence to be safe. For example, a woman must know that if she feels that her life is endangered by her husband, she may need to call the police on Shabbos. In cases where the matter must go to the courts for an order of protection, it is imperative that the right *rav* be involved as well.

The *rav* will usually work in tandem with the wife's therapist — who should, again, be a therapist who specializes in domestic abuse and can also be located through a hotline referral — offering ongoing support and monitoring as needed. The *rav* might also call a recalcitrant husband's *rosh yeshivah* or *rav* to pressure him to seek help and be cooperative. As time goes on, more *rabbanim* and *roshei yeshivah* are becoming aware of the seriousness of this issue and are not allowing it to continue unchecked.

In light of the skyrocketing divorce rate, which is a major concern for Klal Yisrael, the first choice is to try to work out a solution where the abuse stops and the marriage can continue. However, every knowledgeable *rav* aware of the danger and dysfunction of abuse will agree that this behavior cannot be tolerated, and that a woman does not have to live with abuse. The consensus today is that ultimately, if the husband cannot be helped or refuses help, then

the marriage should not be sustained.

Some wives wonder whether their manipulative husbands will tell such a good story that even a competent *rav* will believe the abuser and condemn the victim. In truth, when a husband and wife both come to the *rav* and each tells a convincing story, halachah mandates that we try to ascertain the truth through whatever means we have at our disposal. In lieu of any other credible proof, the woman has the *chezkas kasbrus* unless there is some kind of mental illness suspected, such as a personality disorder. When a woman says she is being abused, we believe her. It is very rare that a woman will cry wolf or distort the facts in order to punish her husband.

Unfortunately, a greater problem than women being properly heard and given the help they need is that many wives in abusive relationships are not even aware that they are being abused. There is a repeated pattern of behavior and a lifestyle of a husband encroaching on his wife's rights, whether it's controlling the finances, using demeaning language, and/or imprisoning and suffocating her even if he never lifts a hand to strike her. The cycle of abuse is an ebb and flow — a string of vicious acts and then apologetic "*teshuvah*" — making it tricky to pinpoint. Only after many, many years of escalating abuse do these women sometimes experience an epiphany, or a concerned friend or family member finally lifts the blindfold. At that point, consultation with the right *rav* is crucial.

In summation, *rabbanim* are responsible for safekeeping the homes of Klal Yisrael. There needs to be a united front where *rabbanim* stand together to protest against abuse, so that the abusive husband cannot just switch shuls when he feels his *rav* is too demanding of him. If a woman comes to a *rav* saying she needs help and she is not safe, then, as a group, we need to stand up and say we will not tolerate this reality. In most cases, when a husband realizes he's going to lose his marriage and he sees that no one is enabling his abuse, he will cooperate.

I will end with what I feel is the mission statement of *rabbanim* today: We are here to preserve marriages and ensure they are *Toradig* in every way. We want, *b'ezras Hashem*, to create safe, beautiful homes in Klal Yisrael where respect and admiration for each other reigns supreme. *Amen, kein yehi ratzon.*

Q. What is the impact of domestic abuse on children? How do we help them through the challenge, and help rehabilitate them after the abuse has ceased?

Responding is Janice Shaw, MSW, who has worked at Jewish Family and Child Services (JFCS) in Toronto, Ontario, for thirteen years, helping children and families in a variety of ways.

This is a complicated question, which doesn't have one single answer. We see different types of impacts depending on the age and developmental stage of the child and the level and nature of the abuse they have been exposed to. Current brain research even shows a physiological effect on infants who have witnessed abuse. Abuse definitely has long-lasting impact in terms of children's development, their ability to tolerate and regulate emotions, and their tendency to later engage in risk-taking behavior as adolescents and teenagers.

Domestic abuse can highly impact children's sense of self and their self-esteem. Very often in abuse situations, one parent will put down or bad-mouth the other parent in order to get the child to dislike that parent. Sadly, what may actually happen is that the children can end up hating themselves because they intuitively know they are a part of the parent who's being put down or abused. Sometimes the children end up adopting the behaviors of the abuser, and they join in treating the mother abusively simply because they observe their father holding the power in the home and getting what he wants, and they'd like to reap that same benefit.

In some cases, the children get triangulated into the abusive dynamic between the mother and father. It might

happen that children will be woken up in the night to watch the abuse take place, or they'll be forced to participate in the abuse. While the intent of the abusive parent is less about harming the child and more about further degrading the mother, the child is deeply affected by these incidents and can suffer extensive emotional and psychological harm.

Very often, when a woman is living with abuse, she's preoccupied not only with her safety and the safety of her children — emotional, physical, and financial — but also with keeping the abuser happy. The abused woman tends to become hypervigilant, paying attention to every single detail of her husband's moods: How did he close or open the front door? What is the look on his face? How do his footsteps sound? Is his tie done up or disheveled?

The minutiae of the details that the woman is tracking are completely preoccupying so that often, mothers are emotionally unavailable to their children without intending to be. The mother never actually intends to harm, ignore, or distance herself from her children, and in fact, she's just trying to keep them safe. But to an outsider, and even to the child involved, her parenting may be met with dismay and disappointment.

To answer the second part of the question, about rehabilitating children, we have to confront a very ironic and painful tragedy. Many people assume that once the abusive man has left the home, or the abuse has stopped, it's smooth sailing for the woman and children. Most often, however, that's just the beginning of a whole new set of challenges for the family. At exactly the time that the mother must deal with her own issues around being abused and the trauma she is still reeling from, her children, who were forced to be well behaved around their fearsome father, now feel safe enough to let out all those pent-up emotions — and lash out!

This is when the aggression can come out among siblings, when there's lots of talking back to their mother, when they act out in school, and so on. The mother

needs to have plenty of support in place if she is to support her children through this delicate juncture in time, when they all need to do critical healing. The mother has to be able to provide her children with healthy discipline and healthy boundaries, and it may take some time.

Mothers need to learn strategies and gain tools to be able to better parent their children who have experienced domestic abuse, because they really do have unique parenting needs. Abused mothers also experience great challenges in discipline, because their self-esteem has been so diminished by living with the abuse that they don't feel they have a right or are in a position to discipline the children. They also feel such guilt about what the children have been exposed to that they further shy away from discipline, and they lack the degree of confidence that real discipline demands. As mothers work to develop and heal in these areas, their children benefit tremendously.

Children from abusive homes need someone to talk to and process with other than their mothers, whom they often worry about and feel a need to protect. The best way to heal the children in a family recovering from domestic abuse is to access help through group or individual therapy and/or support groups. Ideally, both mothers and children should find support groups that will help them gain the tools they need. For example, JFCS is fortunate to have a government-funded program called Here to Help, which offers tandem but separate groups for mothers and children, so that each can get the kind of support they need. The curriculum for the two groups is somewhat parallel so that if, for example, the mothers' group is talking about safety planning, the children are talking about that topic as well.

The main goal of the program — ideal for all families to attain — is to open up the channels of communication between the mothers and their children so they can rebuild. Very often, families would prefer to just sweep matters under the rug — "Let's move on and forget about it. He's



out of the house, and now we can just start fresh!" But for proper emotional healing, children can't just forget about the abuse. They need to talk about what happened, and may still be happening, and to be validated. In this way, the family can, slowly but surely, heal and blossom.

Q. How do we prevent abuse? Are there warning signs girls should watch for during dating? Is there a certain "profile" of a girl who is susceptible to marry an abusive man? And is an abusive home an immediate red flag in considering a potential *shidduch*?

Responding is Shalom Task Force, which is on the frontlines of prevention and treatment of domestic abuse. They operate a completely anonymous, no caller ID, 24-hour hotline for matters of domestic abuse at 888-883-2323 or 718-337-3700.

Shalom Task Force has, for a number of years, given abuse awareness trainings in high schools and seminaries across the United States, Canada, and Israel, explaining the fundamentals of abuse and what to watch for during dating. The problem is, however, that much of the time girls do not want to be aware. In today's world, with a looming *shidduch* crisis, a girl is more likely to ignore warning signs during dating because the thought of staying single is more terrifying to her than the possibility of entering a possibly abusive marriage. She cannot fathom what an abusive marriage looks and feels like, but she does know, firsthand, what a "*nebach*" it is for a girl to remain single.

In fact, during a recent seminar, we asked the girls why they think there are so many broken engagements and marriages today, and they highlighted two factors: pressure to get married, and getting bad advice from people who encouraged the *shidduch* to go through despite the warning signs.

Before we get into the actual warning signs that very often are present in an abusive relationship, it's important to preface them with a very clear disclaimer: warning signs cannot be taken out of context. They must be understood within the framework of the relationship. It happens that a *kallah*, engaged to a wonderful *chasan*, will hear about a

warning sign and will suddenly panic that she is being abused, when their relationship is actually strong and healthy.

The rule of thumb is that if something is worrying the girl or her family, they should be sure to check it out with a competent mentor, *nuv*, or by calling a hotline for advice. There should never be a fear of "crying wolf" — hotlines never monitor calls, and they greatly prefer that a concerned girl call a hundred times about a matter that turns out to be harmless, rather than that a marriage take place that will result in endless pain and destruction.

That said, here are some of the warning signs of possible abuse: Are there unpleasant consequences if you do not agree with your prospective or current *chasan*? Does he put you down constantly, or make you feel that you can never do anything right? Are you taking blame for things that aren't really your fault, just to avoid his anger? Does he say things like, "Your family doesn't like me. We're not going to spend a lot of time with them after we're married"? Is he jealous when you spend time with friends and family members instead of being with him all the time? Do you feel like he's trying to change you?

Of course, in healthy marriages, couples want to make concessions to each other and grow together, but the change must always come from love, not fear.

Perhaps the most important warning signs are these: Do you have a pit in your stomach from the relationship? Do you feel tense and uneasy? Are you living in fear or feeling that you're walking on eggshells? Are you embarrassed to tell anyone about things that have happened on your dates? The most valuable thing a girl can do for herself is to be honest, first and foremost, with her inner conscience. Most people who end up in abusive relationships saw the signs early on, but either chose to ignore them, or went to consult with someone who told them to look the other way.

Girls are taught to be *dan V'kaf zchus*, a very worthy pursuit that's essential in a healthy relationship. But if, while a girl is dating, she finds herself having to be *dan V'kaf zchus* after every date, then she should

really be talking to somebody about it to make sure it's okay. She can call a friend, a teacher, a mentor, a hotline, or a family member, but the matter should not be dismissed until the concern truly abates.

The belief that abused women fit some sort of prototype is a myth. Any woman is susceptible to being exploited by an abusive man, no matter what or who she is. Wonderful, strong, capable girls have suffered abuse in silence because they were too afraid to ruin their image, destroy their parents' happiness, or suffer perceived social shame by admitting to having been abused.

When exploring a *shidduch* with a boy from an abused home, it's important to find out what process the boy has undergone. Has he been exposed to good, solid role models who have provided him with a healthy picture of marriage and relationships? Has he been in therapy to help mold his views properly? Is he willing to be honest and work hard if certain behaviors from his father pop out during his own marriage?

The bald fact is that we all come into marriage with our own baggage, and to deny that is to step into a minefield. However, many children who witnessed or experienced abuse in their homes are able to transform themselves into wonderful parents and spouses through hard work and tremendous honesty. All these factors must be taken into consideration and judged on a case-by-case basis with a professional or an experienced mentor.

Let's end by taking a look at the signs of healthy relationships: they are characterized by a strong sense of mutual trust; you are at ease and able to express yourself; you respect and support each other; you are attentive to each other; you both communicate, negotiate, and compromise; you feel comfortable and safe; you want to build a home together; and it just feels right.

In summation, the gifts of awareness, honesty, and reaching out for help can go a long way in women getting the support they need to stand under the *chuppah* with the right husband and a bright future.