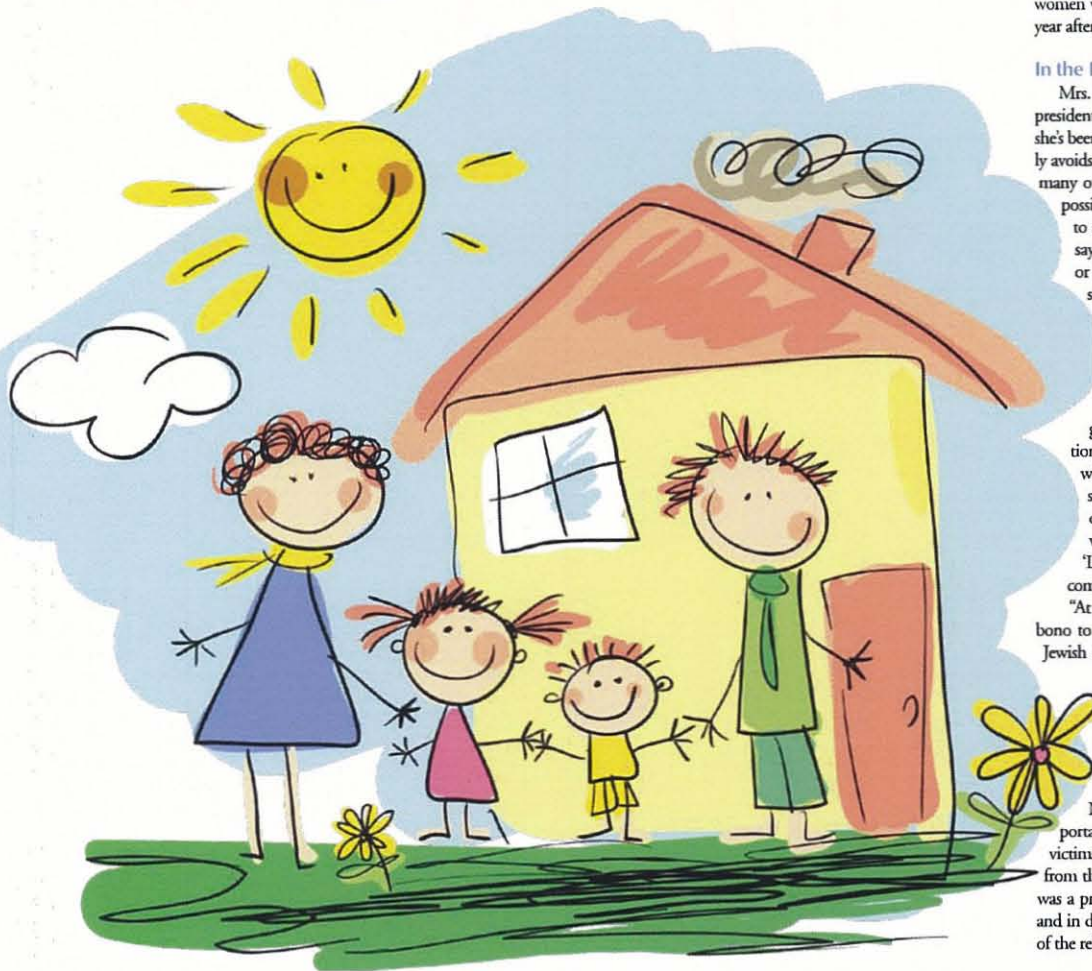


When Fifteen Women Decide to Make a A DIFFERENCE

The Founding of Shalom Task Force



BY AZRIELA JAFFE

Ask any woman who has ever chaired the committee for the Bikur Cholim, Mother Daughter brunch, or the Chinese Auction, and she will tell you that only another woman courageous enough to step forward in such a role can appreciate the sheer enormity of the task. To be honest, I'm usually the parent who volunteers for the tasks that are time-limited — like setting the table or stuffing envelopes. Since I'm a bit chagrined about this deficit in my volunteering threshold, I was particularly fascinated — actually, awed and astonished — when I learned of a group of women volunteers who have done something truly extraordinary. They have come together as volunteers not for a few weeks, not even for a few months, but imagine this — how about for fifteen years? Sounds like fiction? It's not. It's the story behind the founding of Shalom Task Force, an organization founded, launched, and managed by a dedicated group of women volunteers — all of them as busy as you and me — for year after year after year, and they are still going strong.

In the Beginning ...

Mrs. Nechama Wolfson of Lawrence, NY, is presently the president of the board of directors of Shalom Task Force, and she's been an active leader since its very beginnings. She gracefully avoids talking about herself, and much prefers to discuss how many other incredible women have made Shalom Task Force possible, but an interesting thing happens whenever you talk to any of those women. Many begin the conversation by saying something like: "We joined because of Nechama," or "I got involved because Nechama asked me to," or "I've stayed involved all these years because Nechama is the most effective leader I've ever seen, and when she's in charge, there's real progress." So as much as Nechama would prefer this story to include only a passing comment on her role, it must be said, it all began with her. I asked Nechama to take us back to the very beginning, before there was even a concept of an organization dedicated to meeting the needs of *frum* families coping with domestic violence crises. She recalls: "For some reason, that year my children were in and out of the office of their pediatrician, Dr. Hylton Lightman. Every time I went there, the doctor and his then wife would tell me, 'Look, we have a problem with domestic abuse in our community, and we have to do something about it.'

"At the time, Dr. Lightman was giving of his services pro bono to a kosher shelter called 'Transition Center' run by the Jewish Board of Family and Children's Services. He told me that in his medical practice he was seeing Jewish religious women and children who were bruised, coping with terrible situations. Even though he didn't know me well, he'll tell you that he 'just had a sense about me.' So he kept badgering me."

I asked Dr. Lightman why he had zeroed in on Nechama to be his ally and advocate in this cause so important to him. He responded, "As I saw many Orthodox victims of domestic abuse, I knew I had to get other women from the community involved, but I soon discovered that this was a problem for which the majority of people were ignorant and in denial. They didn't know how to address the complexity of the religious and halachic issues that arose.

"I knew Nechama was the right person for this problem. A group of men couldn't have done the same thing as what these women accomplished. Nechama and the other women she recruited developed into a close-knit warm group who were able to do incredibly positive things for Klal Yisrael."

Nechama laughs when she remembers how Dr. Lightman pursued her until she finally responded. "Dr. Lightman was relentless, and after listening to him closely over a period of time, I was moved. I decided, in August of 1992, to assemble a group of people to begin the discussion: What can and should we do for observant women and children, reluctant to come forward, who are in this terrible situation of domestic abuse? We now know that this is a pressing concern, and no one is talking about it, and rabbis are not addressing it either. It's the secret that no one is talking about, but everyone knows.

"I called some women and their husbands I knew from the community — someone very active in Hatzalah, and a social worker, people who were responsible and respected in the community. I knew that each one of them could be trusted. We didn't know what we were going to do; it was really a black box.

"At our first meeting, a total of fifteen people, including the doctor and his former wife, myself, my husband, and one of my daughters, assembled in my living room. Everyone had different reasons for being there. One of the women was there because her sister had been abused in her marriage. Also present was the then-director of the Transition Center, Barbara Harris. She gave us the ABCs of domestic violence and it was awful. We were all so naïve. We endured many sleepless nights after hearing the painful stories."

A Plan of Action

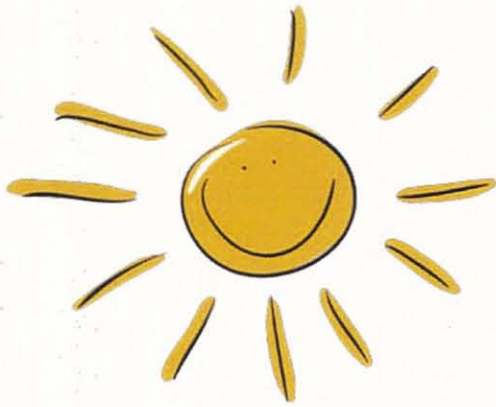
The group continued meeting regularly. "For the first few months, we met at the home of Esther Wein, granddaughter of the late Rabbi Shimon Schwab, *ztz"l*," remembers Nechama. "Esther is an important women's teacher. These meetings were serious work, and although it was tempting when women got together to make it about the food, it wasn't a tea party — I remember that she would serve cold water and chocolate-covered almonds!

"In the beginning, we were completely overwhelmed by the task at hand. We had to think of a name, and we had to figure out what our mission would be. Should we be opening up a shelter? Should we focus on safe homes, and if so, could we keep them truly safe for the volunteers and women involved? Should we do treatment, preventive education, or should our mission be to educate the rabbis about this hidden problem in our community? We had many meetings and discussions with everyone brainstorming until we finally decided to focus on two things to start with; we narrowed ourselves down to starting the first domestic abuse referral hotline that would serve the Orthodox community, and to developing a curriculum for preventive education for young women in high schools and seminars.

"We brainstormed over several meetings about what name we would choose. The whole idea was to encourage people to come forward without stigma. We finally decided on 'Shalom Task Force' — '*shalom*' speaks for itself, and at that time, there were few 'task forces' and the connotation was that we were going to actually do something. The late Rebbetzin Yehudis Perlow, wife of the Novominsker Rebbe, *ztz"l*, once told me that she

loved Shalom Task Force because, she said, 'I go to many meetings. All this talk, nothing gets done. You are accomplishing very important things!'"

The next courageous step was raising public awareness. Nechama still vividly remembers the first public function she hosted. "We called a meeting in my home in the spring of '93, and forty prominent Rebbetzins from the New York area came! Rebbetzin Chana Weinberg, wife of the late Rosh Yeshivah from Ner Yisroel, Rosh Yeshivah Rabbi Yaakov Weinberg, ztz"l, in Baltimore, was the first one to raise the flag in the Jewish community. Prior to this meeting, she had met with Rav Pam and other rabbis to discuss the problem. Rebbetzins started calling one another and inviting one another to the meeting, and interest swelled.



Most of those attending were in disbelief — 'Not in my community'; 'Not in our yeshivah' — and I was so proud of them that they came.

We didn't realize, before we opened the hotline, what we were dealing with



"At the Rebbetzin meeting, most of those attending were in disbelief — 'Not in my community'; 'Not in our yeshivah' — and I was so proud of them that they came. We didn't realize, before we opened the hotline, what we were dealing with. Rebbetzin Weinberg spoke from her personal experience, and she's a credible woman. She tells it every time she speaks: 'When I asked my father, Rav Yaakov Ruderman, ztz"l, Rosh Yeshivah of Ner Israel, if they had this problem in Europe and if so, what did they do, he said they just closed the shutters.'

"We opened the referral hotline in the beginning of '95. We built this up very slowly. We needed to do this right — recruit the right people, make sure they were well trained and professionally supervised. In 1994, at another conference in New York City on domestic abuse, one of the speakers was an Orthodox woman, Dr. Cheryl Kramer, PhD, a social worker with eighteen years experience working in domestic abuse. She was eager to be part of our effort, and soon helped us train four groups of women for the hotline. Twenty-one women trained in the first group."

A Question with No Answer

On May 1, 1996, shortly after starting the hotline, this team of dedicated women organized a pivotal conference for the Orthodox community and the future of STF. They assembled 175 rabbis from the tri-state area for a conference on domestic abuse held at the Fifth Avenue Synagogue in New York. The keynote speaker was Rav Avraham Pam, ztz"l, Rosh Yeshivah of Torah Vodaath. Other speakers were Rabbi Abraham Twerski, MD; Rabbi Tzvi Hersh Weinreb, PhD; and Rabbi Dr. Sol Roth, Rav of the Fifth Avenue Synagogue. Rav Pam opened the conference. The organizers of the conference thought that he was going to give *divrei brachah*, your basic short "be well and be successful" introductory speech. Nechama vividly remembers that moment today:

"It was so incredible. Rav Pam spoke for twenty minutes, and from a transcript of the conference, we still appreciate his final words before he sat down and then joined us for the entire conference, including answering very important questions from the rabbis in attendance."

Rav Pam's Words

"Today, the Shalom Task Force is an address where there was no address before. A telephone call can be made. And these *nashim tzidkoniyyos* [righteous women], these dear ladies, will refer them to a Rav, to somebody who will listen to them, and help them, show them a way out of their dilemma. And efforts will be made to salvage the *shalom bayis*, to bring in unity in the home, and the joy that should be in the Jewish home, and the Shechinah should be able to reside in that home.

"I wish them success to restore the dignity, the *kedushah* of the Jewish home. There should only be harmony and love among all the members of the family, and the

Ribono shel Olam should have *nachas* and say, 'This is the home of my beloved children, *bonei Yisrael u'bnos Yisrael* — Am Yisrael.'"

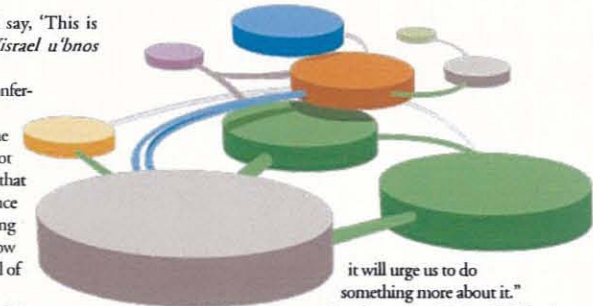
The last question asked of Rav Pam at the conference was from Rabbi Hollander:

"I learned with pain this afternoon that the Jewish family, the Orthodox Jewish family, is not really where we would want it to be. How is it that the Torah does not act as a shield against violence by physical, verbal, psychological means — causing *tzar* to any person and certainly to one's wife? How is it that that which we depended on to be the wall of protection apparently is not working?"

Rav Pam responded, "I think that the *kashieh* is stronger than any *teirutz* that could be given here. It's a painful *kashieh*. We are exposed to a society and influenced by it, and of course, there is the *yetzer hara*, and everyone knows that Rav Yisrael Salanter said that it's easier to learn through all of *Shas* than it is to change one *middah*. So, *middos* is something that has to be worked on constantly. And, if we don't do that, and we don't stress it in the education of the children when they're young — when they're *bochurim*, when they're *yungeleit* — if we don't stress that the *ikar* is *lo hamedrash ha'ikar elah hamaaseh, v'lo hamaaseh ha'ikar elah hamiddos* [the main thing is not learning but rather action, and the main thing is not action but rather character traits], if we don't stress that enough, if we don't honor *middos* more than scholarship, if we don't put a high premium on *middos tovas*, we will have this kind of problem which is very painful. It's a *chillul Hashem*."

"The impression that a *ben Torah* leaves — a *lomed Torah*, an Orthodox Jew leaves — is based on *bein adam l'chaveiro* — his honesty, integrity, kindness, his truthfulness, his *emes*. It hurts us very, very much if we see he breaches it. The great *naalah* of scholarship, of *lomdus b'Torah*, becomes a *chisaron* if there's a lack in the *bein adam l'chaveiro* part of the Torah.

"I'm glad, Rabbi Hollander, that you pointed this out. Maybe



it will urge us to do something more about it."

Another one of Mrs. Wolfson's conference memories: "The influential Rabbi Shmuel Dishon, from Karlin-Stolin, another very important speaker, told me after the conference, 'Mrs. Wolfson, this is historic. An organization like Shalom Task Force could never have been established by anyone other than by a group of women, because you aren't political.' He was right. We weren't pointing a finger at anyone. We were a group of diverse women, able to cross boundaries, with no agenda except to do good and raise awareness. We'd also never before gathered such a diverse group of rabbis into one room. He valued so much that this meeting had taken place."

Inside View

Esther Wein, the noted lecturer from Lawrence, NY, a noted educator who is sought after across the country for her *shiurim*, was one of the original STF board members. She reflects back to those early meetings in her home and the homes of other women in the Five Towns community:

"It all started with Nechama Wolfson, who is a great organizer and friend of mine. At the time I was in my late twenties, and a new mom, and Nechama was older than me. I admired her so much — she was really a get-things-done kind of person. Nechama reached out and brought together all these women

RED FLAGS — WHAT COULD BE CONSIDERED ABUSE?

You may have a suspicion or worry about a friend or family member being abused, but often it's hard to know for sure. Be particularly concerned if you feel that victim is being isolated from family and friends against her will. You might sense that she's frightened and uneasy. The whole sadness of the abused woman is that she feels embarrassed to admit that there's abuse and she will do everything in her power to keep it a secret. In most abuse cases the women are very good at being extremely secretive. Here are some red flags that alert you to the possibility of concern:

Emotional Abuse — examples include:

- ridiculing and calling someone names
- making threats
- belittling someone's abilities
- criticizing or insulting constantly
- isolating someone from friends and family
- putting someone in fear; using looks, actions, gestures; speaking in a loud voice

Financial Abuse — examples include:

- using children to relay abusive messages
- withholding money and access to money
- preventing someone from working or taking away someone's salary
- making someone beg for money, even for groceries
- requiring accountability for all money spent.

Physical Abuse — examples include inflicting bodily harm upon someone by:

- hitting or slapping
- kicking or punching
- pushing or shoving
- throwing objects
- pulling hair
- twisting arms
- choking
- tripping
- refusing to provide medical assistance to someone.

who had different strengths. She balanced out people like me who are strong-minded and active, with other women who are very settled, take-it-slow types. We all had great respect for one another.

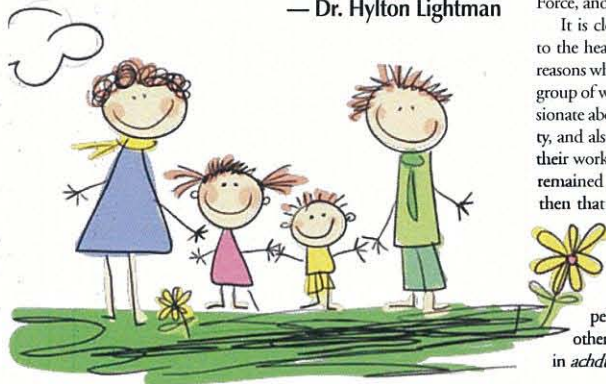
"What Nechama did, which was brilliant, is she delegated a job to absolutely everyone. These were serious meetings where we got things done. For example, when we decided to initiate a hotline, my job was to set up the phone system and the toll-free number, and another woman was in charge of the slogan, and someone else handled publicity and graphic design. We were very methodical. We didn't jump into anything. We deliberated on the name and slogan for a long time. Nechama slowed everything down, which is to her credit. She wouldn't do anything fast, and she was a thousand percent right.

"We were really cautious. She approached it with sensitivity, professionally, carefully, with the job and its parameters and implications totally understood. No one ever argued, there was no *machlokes*; there was always open discussion between all of us. We did our part and we stuck with it for not just days or weeks, but for years."

Incredibly, seventy percent of the core staff of fifteen volunteers who trained in 1992, when the hotline began, are still volunteering on the hotline. The hotline now operates out of several locations throughout the five boroughs, with expanded hours, responding to thousands of calls since the hotline began. Many of these calls are in response to a domestic violence situation.

"I knew Nechama was the right person for this problem. A group of men couldn't have done the same thing as what these women accomplished. Nechama and the other women she recruited developed into a close-knit warm group who were able to do incredibly positive things for Klal Yisrael!"

— Dr. Hylton Lightman



Additionally, the hotline provides referrals and a listening ear for such personal and family concerns as substance abuse; gambling; bereavement; hospice care; eating disorders; kids at risk; infertility and adoption; marriage and family therapy; and social services like housing, food stamps, relocation, clothing, furniture, and employment assistance. Although the majority of assistance for STF still comes from dedicated volunteer advocates who "woman" the hotline sixty-three hours per week, a small handful of paid staff have now joined the fold, to help STF expand its work into much needed and appreciated services such as workshops for engaged couples; programs for kallah teachers, Rebbetzins, mental health professionals and school personnel in the Jewish community; and even dynamic, interactive presentations now in demand in both yeshivos and seminaries, to offer our young people education on healthy communication.

Esther Friedman, a former volunteer for twelve years and Shalom Task Force's director of Marital Education, is quick to clarify a common misconception about Shalom Task Force:

"People think that what STF does is domestic abuse. But it's so much more than that. Our real goal is to promote healthy family relationships. Whether it's educating marriageable-age girls about how to recognize potential concerns in a *shidduch*, or it's teaching healthy engaged couples how to resolve conflict and be able to talk about difficult subjects, or it's responding to a woman who calls the hotline because she's the victim of domestic abuse, or it's even educating ninth- and tenth-grade *yeshivah bochurim* and boys in *beis medrash* on anger management and communication skills — it all falls under the umbrella of serving the Jewish community by increasing *shalom* in all relationships, however we can find ways to do so."

The Right Person

Shalom Task Force has become a force in the prevention of domestic abuse in our community, as well as a welcome resource for those women and children who are in pain and desperate for assistance. Most of the women who gathered together in Nechama's home sixteen years ago are still connected to Shalom Task Force, and to one another.

It is clear to me, after talking with so many women close to the heart and pulse of Shalom Task Force, that one of the reasons why STF has been so successful in its mission is that the group of women who came together to start STF were first passionate about strengthening families and our Jewish community, and also they achieved *shalom* among themselves, through their work together reaching this goal. This commitment has remained steadfast all through the years. It's not surprising then that the fruit from this tree is as sweet as the relationships that were formed fifteen years ago when Dr.

Lightman planted the first seed, asking Nechama Wolfson: "Will you help me, help the *klal*?" He asked the right person. And then Nechama asked the right person, and another right person, and another, and another, one woman reaching out to another, and all of them, in *achdus*, getting the job done. ■