

Shame Borne in Silence: Spouse Abuse in the Jewish Community

By Rabbi Abraham Twerski Quotes

“Let go of my arm!’ I shouted. ‘You’re hurting me.’ He slapped me across the face and pushed me against the wall...“Bernie didn’t speak to me again that night, and the following morning he was as calm as if nothing had happened. [This reaction is in itself a form of abuse, in that the husband’s attitude of serenity in contrast to the wife’s agitation makes her feel that she must be going crazy.]¹

Abuse is non-discriminating and may occur where it is least expected. What about people who are devoutly religious and spiritual? Wait a moment. Let us not confuse terms. Truly spiritual people are very unlikely to be abusive, and truly devout religious people, who are wholesomely religious and observe all of Torah law, are very unlikely to be abusive. You see, the Talmud states that the proper attitude of a husband toward his wife is that “He loves her as much as himself and honors her more than he honors himself” (Yevamos 62b). A person who is truly Torah observant adheres to *all* Talmudic requirements. Clearly, a person who loves his wife as himself and respects her even more than he does himself is very unlikely to be an abuser. The latter behavior is simply incompatible with true Torah observance...Indeed, the need to dominate and control may be a desperate defense against feelings of inadequacy and unworthiness, which are generally unwarranted.²

I must take issue with any authority who defines a battered wife as one who has been beaten for a second time, yet continues to stay in the marriage. I disagree. *Once is once too often*. There is no justification, except for the rare case of a woman attacking her husband, for a husband to ever be physically aggressive towards his wife. It is a serious error to overlook a first incident. There is no grace period. If a husband is physically abusive to his wife even once, the wife should promptly seek counsel... *This does not mean that a single episode of physical or emotional abuse is reason to terminate the relationship*, but it is reason enough to seek competent counseling.³

I will cite only one incident that I believe indicates the quality of their feelings for each other. My father developed cancer of the pancreas, which had spread to the liver. He was very

¹ 15-16 (E-book Edition)

² 23

³ 36

knowledgeable about medicine, and he knew that for this particular type of cancer, chemotherapy was of no value. He said to me, "If chemotherapy could prolong life, I would probably be obligated by Halachah to suffer the many discomforts of treatment. But since it cannot prolong my life, simply to suffer for no reason at all is not a mitzvah." I concurred with him that there was no point in chemotherapy. For whatever reason, the doctor told my mother that chemotherapy was of little value and that at most it might extend his life for three months. "Three months!" my mother exclaimed. "Why, if it could prolong his life even one day it must be done." My mother then said to my father, "We did not survive all the tzoros in our marriage only to be separated prematurely, and every day I am without you is premature." My father then said to me, "I'm sorry the doctor gave her such information, because not only will the chemotherapy not extend my life, it may even shorten it if the side effects are too severe. However, if I do not take it, then Mother will be forever tormented by the thought, 'If only we had insisted on treatment, he might still have lived.' I don't want her to be tormented. I know that I am subjecting myself to misery, but it is not purposeless. It is for the purpose of sparing Mother any distress." Then he added, "There were many things I did for Mother's happiness, and now I am given one last chance to do yet another."⁴

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