

First aid for family violence

JCADA puts new guide in hands of local rabbis

by Paula Amann
News Editor

At moments a rabbi must probe the silences in a congregant family, says Rabbi H. David Rose. Is one person doing all the talking while keeping others from voicing their needs and desires? It could signal deeper problems.

"Sometimes people are not free to talk," said

Rose of Potomac's Conservative Congregation Har Shalom, who has caught hints of domestic abuse amid planning for family *simcha* events over the years. "So it's really important to know what signs to look for and what questions to ask."

Thanks to the Jewish Coalition Against Domestic Abuse, he and other local colleagues now have up-to-date guidance. With support from the Jewish Federation of Greater Washington's United Jewish Endowment Fund, the group recently distributed copies of *Embracing Justice: A Resource Guide for Rabbis on Domestic Abuse*, edited by Rockville's Diane Gardsbane, to nearly 80 area rabbis.

"I keep this booklet close at hand," said Rabbi Jack Moline of Alexan-

dria's Agudas Achim Congregation. "I hear about domestic abuse more frequently than you would imagine."

Released by Jewish Women International in June, this fourth edition of *Embracing Justice* includes fresh material on such topics as identifying an abuser, links between domestic violence and substance abuse and barriers to leaving in such special cases as immigrant, refugee and elderly women.

The expanded guide also features a chart showing patterns of abuse that specifically afflict Jewish families.

For example, an abuser may hold a victim responsible for *shalom bayit* (household harmony) or switch synagogues when domestic abuse is revealed.

Rabbi Fred Scherlinder Dobb of Bethesda's Adat

Shalom Congregation finds "everything from sermon starters to counseling tips" within its covers. He notes that the guide's first edition served as the textbook for his initial training about domestic violence at the Reconstructionist Rabbinical College in the mid-1990s.

The 166-page book also serves as the companion to another JWI publication edited by Gardsbane

designed for non-clergy Jewish professionals, *Healing and Wholeness: A Resource Guide on Domestic Abuse in the Jewish Community*.

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also is urging local rabbis to plan a sermon or other congregational program in October, which has been designated Domestic Violence Awareness Month.

"The more the rabbis become aware and vocal about the issue, the quicker the overall community is going to accept that this is a problem that must be addressed and solved," said JCADA president Barbara Zackheim.

Her group has suggested that congregations use programs on the Shabbat of Oct. 12, when the *parsha* of "Noach" is read, to spotlight domestic violence. In that Torah portion, God expresses outrage over human violence run amok, notes JWI director of programs Nechama Masliansky.

"Violence is a reality of human nature, not unique to Jews, but something that we are required to overcome in order to be civilized and Jewish," said Masliansky.

Yet she and others stress that beyond the obvious (or well-hidden) physical threats and assaults, domestic abuse includes the perversion of power.

"At the bottom of domestic violence is the issue of control and people who perpetuate domestic violence have trouble relinquishing control," noted Rose.

Embracing Justice points to many Jewish texts affirming a woman's right to safety. Yet others exist that seem to sanction wife-beating.

"People like to selectively fish around for texts to justify their

behavior, whether it be spousal abuse or dishonesty in business," commented Rabbi Yitzchak Breitowitz of Silver Spring's Woodside Synagogue-Ahavas Torah.

Breitowitz urges Jews to look at the whole of Judaism, not merely isolated references.

Pressed for a favorite source on the question, however, this Orthodox scholar cites a passage from Gemara, Tractate Yevamot, found in the new guide: "A husband should love his wife as much as he does himself and should respect her even more than he respects himself."

Beyond its specific contents, the guide's very presence in a rabbi's office also sends a critical message, says Moline.

"It is at least as important to pull out *Embracing Justice* to show men and women this [matters] to the Jewish community, as what's inside the book," stressed Moline, a Conservative rabbi.

In his introduction to the new edition of *Embracing Justice*, psychiatrist and Orthodox Rabbi Abraham Twerski relates rabbinic awareness of domestic abuse to basic medical ethics.

"Failure to identify and respond to domestic violence is a sin of omission," Twerski writes. "The medical dictum, *primum non nocere* — first, do no harm — also applies to the harm of failure to identify a problem, failure to hear a cry for help and the failure to act."

Copies of *Embracing Justice* and its companion volume may be obtained from JWI on-line at www.jewishwomen.org or by phone at 800-343-2823.

