

A Commentary on Religious Issues in Family Violence

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The Importance of Religious Issues: Roadblocks or Resources?

The crisis of family violence affects people physically, psychologically, and spiritually. Each of these dimensions must be addressed, both for victims and for those in the family who abuse them. Approached from either a secular or religious perspective alone, certain needs and issues tend to be disregarded. This reflects a serious lack of understanding of the nature of family violence and its impact on people's lives. Treatment of families experiencing violence and abuse requires integrating the needs of the whole person. Thus, the importance of developing a shared understanding and co-operation between secular and religious helpers to deal with family violence cannot be emphasized too strongly.

Occasionally, a social worker, psychotherapist, or other secular service provider will wonder, "why bother with religious concerns at all?" The answer is a very practical one: religious issues or concerns which surface for people in the midst of crisis are **primary issues**. If not addressed in some way, at some point, they will inevitably become roadblocks to the client's efforts to resolve the crisis and move on with her/his life. In addition, a person's religious beliefs and community of faith (church or synagogue) **can** provide a primary support system for an individual and her/his family in the midst of an experience of family violence.

For a pastor, priest, rabbi, lay counselor or other person approaching family violence from a religious perspective, there is little question about the relevance of religious concerns: these are primary for any religious person. Rather, they may doubt the importance of dealing with concerns for shelter, safety, intervention and treatment. "These people just need to get right with God and everything will be fine." This perspective overlooks the fact that these other issues are practical and important as well. Family violence is complex and potentially lethal; these seemingly mundane concerns represent immediate and critical needs.

When confronted with a personal experience of family violence, like any other crisis whether chronic or sudden, most people also experience a crisis of meaning in their lives. Very basic life questions arise and are usually expressed in religious and/or philosophical terms. Questions like, "Why is this happening to me and my family?" or "Why did God let this happen?" or "What meaning does this have for my life?" are all indications of people's efforts to understand, to make sense out of experiences of suffering and to place the experiences in a context of meaning for their lives. These questions are to be seen as a healthy sign because they represent an effort to comprehend and contextualize the experience of family violence and thereby regain some control over their lives in the midst of crisis.

Thus for many individuals and families in crisis, the questions of meaning will be expressed in religious terms, and more specifically, in terms of the Jewish or Christian traditions, since the vast majority of people in the U.S. today grew up with some association with these traditions. Many continue as adults to be involved with a church or synagogue. In addition, Jewish and Christian values overlap with cultural values of the majority American culture, so most Americans carry a set of cultural values, consciously or unconsciously, which are primarily Jewish or Christian in nature.¹

Religious concerns can become roadblocks or resources for those dealing with experiences of family violence because these concerns are central to many people's lives. The outcome depends on how they are handled.

The misinterpretation and misuse of the Jewish and Christian traditions have often had a detrimental effect on families, particularly those dealing with family violence. Misinterpretation of the traditions can

contribute substantially to the guilt, self-blame, and suffering which victims experience and to the rationalizations often used by those who abuse. “But the Bible says...” is frequently used to explain, excuse, or justify abuse between family members. This need not be the case. Re-examining and analyzing those Biblical references which have been misused can lead to reclaiming the traditions in a way which supports victims and those who abuse while clearly confronting and challenging abuse in the family.

A careful study of both Jewish and Christian scriptures makes it very clear that **it is not possible to use scripture to justify abuse of persons in the family**. However, it is also clear that it is possible to misuse scripture and other traditional religious literature for this purpose. This is a frequent practice (see below). Attempting to teach that there are very simple answers to the very complex issues which people face in their lives is another potential roadblock within contemporary teachings of some Jewish or Christian groups. Thus, religious groups have often not adequately prepared people for the traumas which they will face at some point in their lives: illness, death, abuse, divorce, and so forth.

“Keep the commandments and everything will be fine.”

“Keep praying.”

“Just accept Jesus Christ as your Lord and Savior and you will be healthy, prosperous, popular, and happy.”

“Go to services each week.”

“Pray harder.”

While these teachings may be fundamental teachings of religious faith, alone they are inadequate to deal with the complexity of most experiences of human suffering like family violence. When offered as simple and complete answers to life’s questions, they create in the hearer an illusion of simplicity which leaves the hearer vulnerable to becoming overwhelmed by an experience of suffering. In addition, the teachings set up a dynamic which blames the victims for their suffering.

“If you are a **good** Christian or a **good** Jew, God will treat you kindly, or take care of you, or make you prosper as a reward for your goodness.”

“If you suffer, it is a sign that you **must not be** a good Christian or a good Jew and God is displeased with you.”

If one accepts this simple formula (which makes a theological assumption that God’s love is conditional), then when one experiences any form of suffering, one feels punished or abandoned by God. The simple answer alone cannot hold up in the face of personal or familial suffering. When people attempt to utilize the simple answer and it is insufficient, they feel that their faith has failed them or that God has abandoned them. In fact, it may be the teachings or actions of their particular congregation or denomination which have been inadequate to their needs. Thus they may be feeling abandoned.

The religious teachings of the Jewish and Christian traditions are adequate to address the experiences of contemporary persons when the traditions acknowledge the complexity, the paradox, and sometimes the incomprehensible nature of those experiences. The most important resource which the church or synagogue can provide is to be available to support those who are suffering, to be a sign of God’s presence, and to be willing to struggle with the questions which the experiences may raise. Offering sweet words of advice to “solve” life’s problems reduces the experience of the one who suffers to a mere slogan and denies the depth of the pain and the potential for healing and new life.

Cooperative Roles for Secular Counselor and Minister/Rabbi

Both the secular counselor and the minister or rabbi have important roles to play in response to family violence. Families in which there is abuse need the support and expertise of both in times of crisis. Sometimes the efforts of the two will come into conflict, as illustrated by the following situation:

We received a call at the Center from a local shelter for abused women. The shelter worker indicated that she had a badly beaten woman there whose minister had told her to go back home to her husband. The worker asked us to call the minister and “straighten him out.” Ten minutes later we received a call from the minister. He said that the shelter had one of his parishioners there and the shelter worker had told her to get a divorce. He asked us to call the shelter and “straighten them out.”

In the above case, both the shelter worker and the minister had the best interests of the victim in mind. Yet they were clearly at odds with each other because they did not understand the other’s concerns which related to the needs of the victim. The shelter worker did not understand the minister’s concern for maintaining the family and the minister did not understand that the woman’s life was in danger. We arranged for the minister and the shelter worker to talk directly with each other, sharing their concerns in order to seek a solution in the best interest of the victim. This was accomplished successfully. The need for cooperation and communication between counselors and ministers or rabbis is clear so that the needs of parishioners/congregants/clients are best served and the resources of both religious and secular helpers are utilized effectively.

Role of the Secular Counselor. In the secular setting, a social worker or mental health provider may encounter a victim or abuser who raises religious questions or concerns. When this occurs, the following guidelines are helpful:

- 1) Pay attention to religious questions/comments/ references.
- 2) Affirm these concerns as appropriate and check out their importance for the client.
- 3) Having identified and affirmed this area of concern, if you are uncomfortable with it yourself or feel unqualified to pursue it, refer to a pastor/priest/rabbi who is trained to help and whom you know and trust.
- 4) If you are comfortable and would like to pursue the concern, do so, emphasizing the ways in which the client’s religious tradition can be a resource to her/him and can in no way be used to justify or allow abuse or violence to continue in the family. (See below.)

Role of Clergy. The minister/rabbi can most effectively help family abuse victims and offenders by cooperating with secular resources. Combined, these provide a balanced approach which deals with specific external, physical, and emotional needs while addressing the larger religious and philosophical issues.

When approached about family violence, the minister/rabbi can use the following guidelines:

- 1) Be aware of the dynamics of family violence and utilize this understanding in evaluating the situation.
- 2) Use your expertise as a religious authority and spiritual leader to illuminate the positive value of religious traditions while clarifying that they do not justify or condone family abuse. (See below.)
- 3) Identify the parishioner/congregant’s immediate needs and REFER to a secular resource (if available) to deal with the specifics of abuse, intervention and treatment.
- 4) If you are comfortable pursuing the matter, provide additional pastoral support and encouragement to help families dealing with violence to take full advantage of available resources.

Scriptural and Theological Issues

Suffering. The experience of physical or psychological pain or deprivation can generally be referred to as “suffering.” When a person experiences suffering, often the first question is, “Why am I suffering?”

This is really two questions: “Why is there suffering?” and “Why me?” These are classical theological questions to which there are no totally satisfactory answers.

Sometimes a person will answer these questions in terms of very specific cause-and-effect relationships:

“I am being abused by my husband as punishment from God for the fact that 20 years ago, when I was 17 years old, I had sexual relations with a guy I wasn’t married to.”

In this case, the victim of abuse sees her suffering as just punishment for an event which happened long ago and for which she has since felt guilty. This explanation has an almost superstitious quality. It reflects an effort on the part of the woman to make sense out of her experience of abuse by her husband. Her explanation takes the “effect” (the abuse), looks for a probable “cause” (her teenage “sin”), and directly connects the two. This conclusion is based on a set of theological assumptions which support her view: God is a stern judge who seeks retribution for her sins and God causes suffering to be inflicted on her as punishment.

Unfortunately, the woman’s explanation neither focuses on the real nature of her suffering (i.e., the abuse by her husband), nor does it place responsibility for her suffering where it lies: on her abusive husband.

Sometimes, people try to explain suffering by saying that it is “God’s will” or “part of God’s plan for my life” or “God’s way of teaching me a lesson.” These explanations assume God to be stern, harsh, even cruel and arbitrary. This image of God runs counter to a Biblical image of a kind, merciful and loving God. The God of this Biblical teaching does not single out anyone to suffer for the sake of suffering, because suffering is not pleasing to God.

A distinction between voluntary and involuntary suffering is useful at this point. Someone may choose to suffer abuse or indignity in order to accomplish a greater good. For example, Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. suffered greatly in order to change what he believed to be unjust, racist laws. Although the abuse he experienced was not justifiable, he chose voluntary suffering as a means to an end.

Involuntary suffering which occurs when a person is beaten, raped, or abused, especially in a family relationship also cannot be justified but is never chosen. It may, on occasion, be endured by a victim for a number of reasons, including a belief that such endurance will eventually “change” the person who is being abusive. However, this belief is unrealistic and generally only reinforces the abuse.

Christian tradition teaches that suffering happens to people because there is evil and sinfulness in the world. Unfortunately, when someone behaves in a hurtful way, someone else usually bears the brunt of that act and suffers as a result. Striving to live a righteous life does not guarantee that one will be protected from the sinfulness of another. A person may find that she/he suffers from having made a poor decision, (e.g. by marrying a spouse who is abusive). But this in no way means that the person either wants to suffer or deserves abuse from the spouse.

In Christian teaching, at no point does God promise that we will not suffer in this life. In scripture, God does promise to be present to us when we suffer. This is especially evident in the Psalms which give vivid testimony to people’s experience of God’s faithfulness in the midst of suffering (see Psalms 22 and 55).

One’s fear of abandonment by God is often strong when experiencing suffering and abuse. This fear is usually experienced by victims of abuse who often feel they have been abandoned by almost everyone: friends, other family members, clergy, doctors, police, lawyers, counselors. Perhaps none of these believed the family members or were able to help. It is therefore very easy for victims to conclude that God has also abandoned them. For Christians, the promise to victims from God is that even though all others abandon them, God will be faithful. This is the message found in Romans:

“For I am sure that neither death, nor life, nor angels, nor principalities, nor things present, nor anything else in all creation, will be able to separate us from the love of God in Christ Jesus our Lord.”
(Romans 8:38-39, RSV).

Often this reassurance is very helpful to victims of violence or to those who abuse them.

Sometimes, people who regard suffering as God's will for them believe that God is teaching them a lesson and/or that hardship builds character. Experiences of suffering can, in fact, be occasions for growth. People who suffer may realize in retrospect that they learned a great deal from the experience and grew more mature as a result. This often is the case, but only if the person who is suffering also receives support and affirmation throughout the experience. With the support of family, friends, and helpers, people who are confronted with violence in their family can end the abuse, possibly leave the situation, make major changes in their lives, and grow as mature adults. They will probably learn some difficult lessons: increased self-reliance; how to express anger; that they may survive better outside than inside abusive relationships; that they can be a whole person without being married; that they can exercise control over their actions with others; that family relationships need not be abusive and violent.

However, this awareness of suffering as the occasion for growth **must come from those who are suffering** and at a time when they are well on their way to renewal. It is hardly appropriate when someone is feeling great pain to point out that things really are not so bad and that someday she/he will be glad that all of this happened. These words of "comfort and reassurance" are usually for the benefit of the minister/rabbi or counselor, not the parishioner/congregant or client. At a later time, it may be useful to point out the new growth which has taken place, and very simply to affirm the reality that this person has survived an extremely difficult situation. Suffering may present an occasion for growth; whether this potential is actualized depends on how the experience of suffering is managed.

Nature of the Marriage Relationship: A Jewish Perspective. The Jewish marriage ceremony is known as "Kiddushin" or sanctification. Through it a couple's relationship is sanctified or set apart before God. This sanctification reminds Jews to strive to express their holiness through marriage and the home in a covenantal relationship which is based on mutual love and respect.

Judaism views marriage as necessary for fulfillment. Marriage is part of God's plan. The first time God speaks to Adam, God says that it is not fitting that Adam should be alone. "Shalom Bayit," peace in the home, is a major family value in Judaism. "Shalom," which is simply translated as "peace," also signifies wholeness, completeness, fulfillment. Peace in the home, domestic harmony, encompasses the good and welfare of all the home's inhabitants.

The rabbis consider domestic tranquility as one of the most important ideals because it is the essential forerunner to peace on earth. "Peace will remain a distant vision until we do the work of peace ourselves. If peace is to be brought into the world we must bring it first to our families and communities."²

The concept of Shalom Bayit should not be misinterpreted as encouraging the preservation of an abusive marriage. When domestic harmony is impossible because of physical abuse, the only way for peace may be dissolution of marriage. Although marriage is viewed as permanent, divorce has always been an option according to the Jewish tradition.

In Judaism conjugal rights are obligatory upon the husband who must be available for his wife.

"A wife may restrict her husband in his business journey to nearby places only, so that he would not otherwise deprive her of her conjugal rights. Hence he may not set out without her permission."³

While the husband is responsible for his wife's sexual fulfillment, the wife, in return, is expected to have sexual relations with her husband. Maimonides⁴ teaches us about the relationship between husband and wife in a Jewish marriage. He asserts that if the wife refuses sexual relations with her husband...

"she should be questioned as to the reason... If she says, 'I have come to loathe him, and I cannot willingly submit to his intercourse,' he must be compelled to divorce her immediately for she is not like a captive woman who must submit to a man that is hateful to her."⁵

This suggests that no wife is expected to submit to sexual activity with a husband she fears or hates. The arena of sexual sharing for Jewish couples is one of mutual responsibility and choice.

Nature of the Marriage Relationship: A Christian Perspective. Christian teaching about the model of the marriage relationship has traditionally focused heavily on Paul's letters to the Ephesians, Corinthians, and Colossians. Misinterpretations of or misplaced emphasis on these texts create substantial problems for many married couples. Most commonly, directives on marriage based on scripture are given to women and not to men, and state that wives must "submit" to their husbands. This often is interpreted to mean that the husband/father is the absolute head of the household and that the wife and children must obey him without question. Unfortunately, this idea has also been interpreted to mean that wives and children must submit to abuse from husbands and fathers. This rationalization is used by those who abuse, as well as by counselors, clergy, and the victims of the abuse themselves.

A closer look at the actual scriptural references reveals a different picture. For example, Ephesians 5:21:

"Be subject **to one another** out of reverence for Christ." (RSV, emphasis added)

This is the first and most important verse in the Ephesians passage on marriage and also the one most often overlooked. It clearly indicates that all Christians - husbands and wives - are to be **mutually subject** to one another. The word which is translated "be subject to" can more appropriately be translated "defer" or "accommodate" to.

"Wives accommodate to your husbands, as to the Lord." (Ephesians 5:22)

This teaching implies sensitivity, flexibility, and responsiveness to the husband. In no way can this verse be taken to mean that a wife must submit to abuse from her husband.

"For the husband is the head of the wife as Christ is the head of the Church, his body, and is himself its savior. As the church is subject to Christ, so let wives also be subject in everything to their husbands." (Ephesians 5:23-24, RSV)

The model suggested here of husband-wife relationship is based on the Christ-church relationship. It is clear from Jesus' teaching and ministry that his relationship to his followers was not one of dominance or authoritarianism, but rather one of servanthood. For example, Jesus washed the feet of his disciples in an act of serving. He taught them that those who would be first must in fact be last. Therefore, a good husband will not dominate or control his wife but will serve and care for her, according to Ephesians.

"Even so husbands should love their wives as their own bodies. He who loves his wife loves himself. For no man ever hates his own flesh, but nourishes it and cherishes it, as Christ does the Church, because we are members of his body." (Ephesians 5:28-29, RSV)

This instruction to husbands is very clear and concrete. A husband is to nourish and cherish his own body and that of his wife. Physical battering which occurs between spouses is probably the most blatant violation of this teaching and a clear reflection of the self-hatred in the one who is abusive.

It is interesting that the passages quoted above from Ephesians (5:21-29) which are commonly used as instruction for marriage are instruction primarily for husbands; nine of the verses are directed toward husband's responsibilities in marriage; only three of the verses refer to wives' responsibilities and one refers to both. Yet, contemporary interpretation often focuses only on the wives and often misuses those passages to justify the abuse of the wives by their husbands. While spouse abuse may be a common pattern in marriage, it certainly cannot be legitimated by scripture.

In terms of sexuality in marriage, again this passage from Ephesians (see also Colossians 3:18-21) has been used to establish a relationship in which the husband has conjugal rights and the wife has conjugal duties. In fact, other scriptural passages are explicit on this issue:

“The husband should give to his wife her conjugal rights, and likewise the wife to the husband. For the wife does not rule over her own body, but the husband does: likewise, the husband does not rule over his own body, but the wife does.” (I Corinthians 7:3-4, RSV)

The rights and expectations between husband and wife in regard to sexual matters are explicitly equal and parallel, and include the right to refuse sexual contact. The expectation of equality of conjugal rights and sexual access and the need for mutual consideration in sexual activity is clear. The suggestion that both wife and husband “rule over” the other’s body and not their own refers to the need for joint, mutual decisions about sexual activity rather than arbitrary, independent decisions. A husband does not have the right to act out of his own sexual needs without agreement from the wife; likewise, the wife also. This particular passage directly challenges the incidents of sexual abuse (rape) in marriage frequently reported by physically abused wives.

The Marriage Covenant and Divorce. A strong belief in the permanency of the marriage vows may prevent an abused spouse from considering separation or divorce as options for dealing with family violence. For the Christian, the promise of faithfulness “for better or for worse... ‘til death do us part” is commonly taken to mean “stay in the marriage no matter what,” even though death of one or more family members is a real possibility in abusive families. Jews view marriage as permanent, but “til death do us part” is not part of the ceremony. The Jewish attitude embodies a very delicate balance. Marriage is taken very seriously. It is a primary religious obligation and should not be entered into or discarded flippantly. Nevertheless, since the days of Deuteronomy, Jewish tradition has recognized the unfortunate reality that some couples are hopelessly incompatible and divorce may be a necessary option.

For some Christians, their denomination’s strong doctrinal position against divorce may inhibit them from exercising this means of dealing with family violence. For others, a position against divorce is a personal belief often supported by their family and church. In either case, there is a common assumption that any marriage is better than no marriage at all and, therefore, should be maintained at any cost. This assumption arises from a superficial view of marriage which is concerned only with appearances and not with substance. In other words, as long as marriage and family relationships maintain a facade of normalcy, there is a refusal by church and community to look any closer for fear of seeing abuse or violence in the home.

The covenant of Christian marriage is a life-long, sacred commitment made between two persons and witnessed by other persons and by God. Jews also regard marriage as sacred and intend that it be permanent. A covenant between marriage partners has the following elements:

1. It is made in full knowledge of the relationship.
2. It involves a mutual giving of self to the other.
3. It is assumed to be lasting.
4. It values mutuality, respect, and equality between persons.

A marriage covenant can be violated by one or both partners. It is common thinking in both Jewish and Christian traditions that adultery violates the marriage covenant and results in brokenness in the relationship. Likewise, violence or abuse in a marriage violates the covenant and fractures a relationship. In both cases the trust which was assumed between partners is shattered. Neither partner should be expected to remain in an abusive situation. Often, one marriage partner feels a heavy obligation to remain in the relationship and do everything possible to make it work. This is most often true for women. A covenant relationship only works if both partners are able and willing to work on it. In both traditions, it is clear that God does not expect anyone to stay in a situation that is abusive (i.e. to become a doormat). In the Christian tradition, just as Jesus did not expect his disciples to remain in a village that did not respect and care for them (Luke 9:1-6), neither does he expect persons to remain in a family relationship where they are abused and violated. In Jewish literature, the expectation is also clear:

“...if a man was found to be a wife beater, he had to pay damages and provide her with separate maintenance. Failing that, the wife had valid grounds for compelling a divorce.”⁶

If there is a genuine effort to change on the part of the one who is abusive, it is possible to renew the marriage covenant, including in it a clear commitment to nonviolence in the relationship. With treatment for the family members, it **may** be possible to salvage the relationship. If the one who is being abusive is not willing or able to change in the relationship, then the question of divorce arises. At this point in the marriage, divorce is really a matter of public statement: “Shall we make public the fact that our relationship has been broken by abuse?” The other option, of course, is to continue to pretend that the marriage is intact. (A woman reported that she divorced only a month ago but that her marriage ended ten years ago when the abuse began.)

In violent homes, divorce is not breaking up families. Violence and abuse are breaking up families. Divorce is often the painful, public acknowledgement of an already accomplished fact. While divorce is never easy, it is, in the case of family violence, the lesser evil. In many cases divorce may be a necessary intervention to generate healing and new life from a devastating and deadly situation.

Parents and Children. “Honor your father and your mother” is one of the Ten Commandments taught to all Jewish and Christian children. Unfortunately, some parents misuse this teaching in order to demand unquestioning obedience from their children. In a hierarchical, authoritarian household, a father may misuse his parental authority to coerce a child into abusive sexual activity (incest). Parents may use this commandment to rationalize their physical abuse of a child in retaliation for a child’s lack of obedience.

For Christians, the meaning of the third commandment is made very clear in Ephesians:

“Children, obey your parents **in the Lord**, for this is right. ‘Honor your father and mother’ (this is the first commandment with a promise) ‘that it may be well with you and that you may live long on the earth.’ Fathers, do not provoke your children to anger, but bring them up **in the discipline and instruction of the Lord.**” (Ephesians 6:1-4, RSV, emphasis added)

Children’s obedience to their parents is to be “in the Lord;” it is not to be blind and unquestioning. In addition to instructions to children, instructions are also given to parents to guide and instruct their children in Christian values, i.e. love, mercy, compassion, and justice. Any discipline of a child must be for the child’s best interest. The caution to the father not to provoke the child to anger is most appropriate. If there is anything that will certainly provoke a child to anger, it is physical or sexual abuse by a parent.

Jewish tradition deals with the same concern, making a distinction between children based on maturity.

“One is forbidden to beat his grownup son, the word ‘grownup’ in this regard, refers not to age but to his maturity. If there is reason to believe that the son will rebel, and express that resentment by word or deed, even though he has not yet reached the age of Bar Mitzvah (13), it is forbidden to beat him. Instead he should reason with him. Anyone who beats his grownup children is to be excommunicated, because he transgresses the Divine Command (Lev. 19:14) ‘Thou shalt not put a stumbling block before the blind’ (for they are apt to bring sin and punishment upon their children).”⁷

Even though Jewish law gives great authority to the father in relationship to the children, the requirement for restraint is clearly indicated. Again, the priority is on the welfare of the child.

The other scriptural injunction which is commonly used to justify abusive discipline of children is the Proverb, “Spare the rod and spoil the child.” This proverb is commonly interpreted to mean that if a parent does not use corporal punishment on a child, the child will become a spoiled brat. This is a good example of a misinterpretation based on a contemporary understanding. In fact, the image referred to in this Proverb is probably that of shepherd and the rod is the shepherd’s staff (see Psalm 23.4: “thy rod and thy staff shall comfort me”). A shepherd uses his staff to guide the sheep where they should go. The staff is not used as a cudgel.

With this image of the shepherd guiding the sheep in mind, it is certainly clear that children need guidance and discipline from parents and other caring adults to grow to maturity. Children do not need to be physically beaten to receive guidance or discipline. Beating children as discipline teaches them very early that it is all right to hit those you love for their own good. This kind of lesson fosters early training for persons who grow up and subsequently physically abuse their spouses and children.

Confession and Forgiveness. The need to admit wrongdoing experienced by an abusive family member is a healthy sign that he/she is no longer denying the problem but is ready and willing to face it. The offender may seek out a minister or rabbi for the purpose of confessing.

Sometimes, however, an abusive father confesses, asks forgiveness, and promises never to sexually approach his daughter again, or a mother swears never to hit her child in anger again. The minister/rabbi is then put in a position of assuring forgiveness and evaluating the strength of the person's promise not to abuse again. While the abuser may be genuinely contrite, he/she is seldom able to end the abuse without assistance and treatment.

The minister/rabbi needs to assure the person of God's forgiveness and must confront the person with the fact that he/she needs additional help in order to stop the abuse. For some people, a strong word from a minister/rabbi at this point is an effective deterrent: "The abuse must stop now." Sometimes this strong directive can provide an external framework for beginning to change the abusive behavior.

For the Jew the Hebrew term "teshuvah" is the word for repentance. "Teshuvah" literally means "return", clearly denoting a return to God after sin. In Judaism there is a distinction between sins against God and sins against people. For the former only regret or confession is necessary. For sins against people, "teshuvah" requires three steps: first, admission of wrongdoing; second, asking for forgiveness of the person wronged (here abused); third, reconciliation which can be accomplished only by a change in behavior.

The issue of forgiveness also arises for victims of abuse. A friend or family member may pressure the victim: "You should forgive him. He said he was sorry." Or it may arise internally: "I wish I could forgive him..." In either case, the victim feels guilty for not being able to forgive the abuser. In these cases, often forgiveness is interpreted to mean to forget or pretend the abuse never happened - Neither is possible. The abuse will never be forgotten it becomes a part of the victim's history. Forgiveness is a matter of the victim's being able to say that she/he will no longer allow the experience to dominate her/his life - and will let go of it and move on. This is usually possible if there is some sense of justice in the situation, officially (through the legal system) or unofficially. Forgiveness by the victim is possible when there is repentance on the part of the abuser, and real repentance means a change in the abuser's behavior.

Another issue is timing. Too often the minister/rabbi or counselor's need for the victim to finish and resolve the abusive experience leads him/her to push a victim to forgive the abuser. Forgiveness in this case is seen as a means to hurry the victim's healing process along. Victims will move to forgive at their own pace and cannot be pushed by others' expectations of them. It may take years before they are ready to forgive; their timing needs to be respected. They will forgive when they are ready. Then the forgiveness becomes the final stage of letting go and enables them to move on with their lives.

Conclusion

This commentary addresses some of the common religious concerns raised by people dealing with family violence. It is an attempt to help the reader begin to see ways of converting potential roadblocks into valuable resources for those dealing with violence in their families.

Personal faith for a religious person can provide much needed strength and courage to face a very painful situation and make changes in it. Churches and synagogues can provide a much needed network of community support for victims, abusers, and their children.

It is clearly necessary for those involved in Jewish and Christian congregations and institutions to begin to address these concerns directly. In ignorance and oversight, we do much harm. In awareness and action, we can contribute a critical element to the efforts to respond to family violence in our communities.

Notes

¹ The discussion of religious issues included here reflects a Jewish and Christian perspective due to the background and experience of the authors and contributors. Although there are other religious traditions also present in the pluralistic American culture, the focus of this discussion is limited by the authors' perspectives and experiences.

² Gates of Repentance (High Holy Days Prayer Book)
Central Conference of American Rabbis, 1978, p.67.

³ Yad Ishut. XIV-2. Yale Judaica Senes. P 87.

⁴ Maimonides was a Jewish philosopher (1135-1204) whose *Mishneh Torah* became a standard work of Jewish law and a major source for all subsequent codification of Jewish law.

⁵ Yad Ishut. XIV-8. P 89.

⁶ Maurice Lamm. *Jewish Way in Love and Marriage*. p 157

⁷ Kizzur Shulhan Arukh

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