

# Jewish domestic violence: belief is first step toward solution



Panelists and organizers (from left, standing) Rabbi Melanie Aron; Eve Spector and Celia Harms from B'nai B'rith Women; Carole Gopin; (seated) Rebecca Schwartz; Naomi Tucker; and Zora Kolkey.

by Laura Bernell

Typically, when a Jewish woman sought a way out of a violent home, the rabbi she turned to for help disbelieved her, minimized her problem, or told her to go home and maintain at least an image of "shalom bayit," no matter what. And she did. She kept the family together, despite decades of living with a man who every day bullied, degraded, controlled or physically abused her and frightened her children.

This situation has persisted well into the 1990's because of Jewish belief in a Jewish myth: Domestic violence and spousal abuse don't happen in Jewish families. Not so.

The fact is 20 to 30 percent of Jewish families in the United States and Israel experience domestic violence, similar to the incidence in non-Jewish families. According to Carol Gopin of the Jewish Family Service of Santa Clara County, of the individuals who seek help through the Jewish Family Service of Santa Clara County,

50 percent report either domestic violence in their families or child or sexual abuse in their pasts. Of those 50 percent, 25 percent are Jewish.

While there is still group denial of these *shandehs*, the Jewish community of Santa Clara County is beginning to take note of its domestic violence. "For the first time, our community is coming out of the closet and acknowledging that we have battering in our own homes," Gopin said.

As an act of that acknowledgement, the organized Jewish community put together in October a women's panel discussion on domestic violence in the Jewish community, held at Congregation Sinai. B'nai Brith Women, Greater Garden City Chapter; Shalom Bayit and the Bay Area Jewish Women's Task Force on Domestic Violence, convened the panel. Women's American ORT and all the CAER members, made up of 15 local Jewish agencies including synagogues, day schools, the Addison-Pensak Jewish Community Center, and the Jewish Federation of Greater San Jose co-spon-

sored the panel.

Though sparsely attended, (the event took place on a truly dark and stormy night full of thunder and lightning), involvement by so many Jewish organizations marks an important first step. "First you must admit that some Jewish men abuse their wives. Then you can help women stand up against domestic violence and stand up for themselves and their children," a panelist said.

Denial of domestic violence increases the woman's sense of shame and withdrawal into secretiveness. And secretiveness increases her danger. Battered women live behind closed doors, frightened and desperate, partly because no one believes them. And partly because they believe they've

nowhere else to go.

Today, panelists agree, rabbis and the organized Jewish community are beginning to respond more openly to victims of domestic violence and abuse. Indeed, our own Jewish Family Services is putting together for them a support group.

But most of us, if we believe there's a problem at all, still say it's a personal problem—an intimate problem. What can an outsider possibly do to help? Start here: If a Jewish woman ever hints to you, ever so slightly, that she is suffering at the quick hands or lacerating tongue of a bullying husband—believe her. That makes everything else possible.

## COMMUNITY SERVICES FOR VICTIMS OF DOMESTIC ABUSE

Shalom Bayit .....	(415) 241-8874
Jewish Family Service of Santa Clara County .....	356-7576
Mid-Peninsula Support Network .....	(415) 940-7855 or -7850
Family Services Association of Santa Clara Valley .....	288-6205
Santa Clara County Victim Witness Assistance Prog. ....	295-2656
Legal Aid Society of Santa Clara County .....	998-5200
WATCH - (Women and Their Children, ..... a non-emergency transitional housing program)	942-0209
Next Door, San Jose (emergency shelter) .....	279-2962 or 279-7550