

JEWISH WOMEN'S AID SHABBAT 2025

MAGEN AVOT

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Yaakov Ovinu turns up at the well and is told that the shepherds are waiting until everyone comes before they can take the top stone off because it's so heavy. Yaakov says nothing and does nothing. Then along comes Rivka and suddenly Yaakov is able to remove the cover himself and provide water for her sheep.

Does that make Yaakov Ovinu a chivalrous knight, or a misogynistic predator?

When we talk about coercive control and domestic abuse – which we must talk about openly on today's Jewish Women's Aid Shabbat – we have to predicate our discussion on two fundamental truths:

- Abuse is relative as to time, place and context.

And

- Abuse is a spectrum and a continuum, not an absolute.

At some periods and places in history, for a man to attract a girl's attention by demonstrating superior strength was regarded as a socially acceptable method of setting the parameters for a relationship. In liberal society today, it raises alarm signals as appearing to wish to found that relationship on a physical power imbalance rather than by focusing on equalities of values and aspirations. And Yaakov's behaviour is immediately reinforced by ostentatious and extravagant self-sacrifice, another common method of making a partner feel inferior or indebted and less entitled to equal treatment, and another danger signal.

I anticipated one or two giggles and smirks at that: and I notice that equally predictably they come exclusively from the male-side of the mechitzah. A keen sense of the absurd or humorous is one of the first tools in the armoury of the would-be abuser: anything that can be passed off as, to use the description deployed before me this week by a senior public servant in a discussion about their behaviour, “simply adult humour”, is a convenient way of appearing to render acceptable something that is inherently unacceptable; and if I can persuade enough other people to join in the laughter it has the added advantage of making the victim appear to others, and ideally even to themselves, as though it is their lack of humour, and not my lack of sensitivity or decency, that is the problem.

As I responded to that public servant, whether or not something is humorous to someone or even to everyone is irrelevant to whether or not it is also abusive, exploitative or manipulative behaviour.

Ma’aseh Ovot Siman La’bonim does not mean that we are to observe and follow the actions of our founding mothers and fathers as precise models for our behaviour today, uncritically and without thought. It means that we should study their behaviour and learn from it – and that may involve contextualising their behaviour, using it as a starting point to provoke trains of thought about our relationship with the *Ribono Shel Oilom* and our relationships with people; gathering thoughts, ideas and values and then translating and applying them within a contemporary moral context. We can observe Yaakov Ovinu’s behaviour in building his relationship without either condemning it or affirming it: but accepting it as an opportunity to compare societal norms of those times with our own views on how to build effective and equal inter-personal relationships.

Bigamy was fine once: then we decided it was no longer fine – in doing so we were not changing Torah values, on the contrary we were accepting what the *Chovos Halvovos* describes as the continual mitzvah of the verse in Tehilim Kuf, posuk gimmel of *d'u ki Hashem Hu Eloikim* – to recognise, understand and constantly refine our perception of the nature of the *Ribono Shel Oilom* – by not simply following the habits, customs and traditional behaviours of our ancestors but by scrutinising them against core Jewish values and applying them with a constantly refining sensitivity to developing societal expectations and norms.

As the Midrashic aphorism has it: *derech erez kodma la'Torah* – and *derech erez* is relative; it changes from time to time, from place to place and from community to community.

In addition to humour, sanctimonious adherence to religious ritual is another powerful tool in the abuser's armour. No rabbi today would argue that the sanctity of marriage or the *mitzvah* to honour one's father and mother would justify any girl being forced into a marriage to which she did not freely consent. But many rabbis appear entirely happy to argue that the need to make adjustments to reflect a stereotypical feminine predilection for emotion-based reactions provides a justification for slowing down the process of enabling a woman to leave an abusive marriage; and rabbis regularly argue that their control of the parties as a matter of religious ritual in cases concerning *gittin* can be used as a helpful counterpart to the balance that secular law has struck between fathers and mothers in the divorce process, in the estimation of those rabbis. Forced marriage is never right: and it is as wrong to force either party to remain in a marriage to which they no longer consent as it is to force a party to contract an alliance they do not want in the first place.

Permitting, encouraging or facilitating a man to blackmail or torture a woman by refusing to grant a *get*, or a woman to blackmail or torture a man by refusing to accept a *get*, is not a complicated issue of *halochoh*, it is not a nuanced issue of communal politics, it is coercive control and domestic abuse, and it should never be permitted to wear any other more respectable or equivocal face.

We should not forget that the single most oppressive regime for women in the world today, which is inflicting literally unsurpassed barbarism on girls and women, the Taliban government of Afghanistan, are doing it all in the name of the religious virtue of modesty.

Why is a central plank of the law of kiddushin – *sheva brochos* – taken from the words in this week's parashah of Lovon, one of the most wicked people in the Torah? As the *Baruch She'omar* doesn't quite say, but perhaps would have done a few decades later, it is to show us that when prevailing social morals as articulated even by a bad actor are consistent with our contemporary sensibility, we adopt them as the word of God if written in the Torah. When even the words or actions of a good actor offend our sensibilities, we approach them with care, and we apply the relativity that is encapsulated by the rabbis themselves in their insistence that *derech erez* as it appears from time to time is a necessary prerequisite for the observance of ritual in a way that leads towards, and not away from, genuine spiritual attainment.

Simply talking about domestic abuse of all kinds in shul is in itself an important task. Victims of coercion and abuse of all kinds are commonly gaslit by the highly intelligent perpetrators into a self-image of being unreasonable, humourless, demanding, selfish, quixotic or simply deranged. We need to say regularly in communal spaces that abuse is never the fault of the victim. There is no provocation that justifies domestic abuse or coercive control; and only the

victim is entitled to an opinion as to whether or not they consent to the behaviour to which they are subjected.

But as well as talk, we need to provide practical assistance. Jewish Women's Aid exists to provide assistance to women who need to be heard, helped and protected. It provides safety, dignity and hope to women who very often had no idea of where else to turn. That and other wonderful charitable organisations in our community aim to help and support women and men who are the victims of exploitation and abuse.

But it starts with us. By having open and honest conversations about abusive behaviour of all kinds; and also by looking out for people in our community who may be vulnerable in all kinds of ways that do not appear obviously on the surface. Open offers of friendship or companionship to people who may appear lonely, isolated or simply open to talking, may encourage someone to open up and share, and start the process of acknowledging a problem and seeking help.

The road to help always has to start with a single conversation: and anyone of us can be that starting point.
