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### **Domestic Violence: Information for Chassan Teachers**

Domestic violence is unfortunately a real part of the lives of all too many men and women in our community. (Although there are certainly cases where men are the victims, since in the majority of cases they are the abusers, we will speak in general about men as the abuser and women as the victim.) The Orthodox community is not spared from this highly sensitive social problem, and in fact, what research exists seems to show that the rates of domestic violence are quite similar to those found in other circles.

In the Orthodox community (as well as in many other tight-knit faith and ethnic communities), the problem is compounded by a powerful social pressure not to discuss this issue. For a host of reasons which you may already have some sense of and which I won't go into depth about here, domestic violence is generally kept under wraps, swept under the rug, ignored, or denied outright. Part of the work of those of us in the field is to counter this mentality and bring the problem to light, where it can be addressed and solved. Painful as it is, this is the only way to healing our broken families and suffering victims.

#### **Why This Booklet?**

Rabbanim and other educators who work with *chassanim* are in a unique position to bring a modicum of prevention and respite to the field of domestic violence. It is well-known that abusers rarely come in for therapy; those that do don't often make much progress. (The only proven approach to helping abusers is specialized abuser groups, which are not commonplace; and even these aren't successful at very high rates.) However, it is not very well known what goes into the making of an abuser (though themselves having been abused is highly correlated), or how such a fate can be avoided early on. In this booklet we hope to provide a number of ideas and tools that we hope will help you, the teachers of *chassanim*, to present important ideas to these young men that may help you to steer them in the right direction, and to recognize warning signs if they are already present.

This effort is a work in progress. We encourage you to contact us with your comments and input at [info@knafayim.com](mailto:info@knafayim.com).

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## Definition

Before anything else, it is important that we establish a definition of “domestic violence” (also referred to as domestic abuse, spousal abuse, and intimate partner violence). The definition we will be operating from is that domestic violence is *a pattern of controlling behaviors that consists of physical, sexual, emotional, and/or psychological abuse*. The key words here are *pattern* and *control*. The behaviors we include in the term “violence”, therefore, are not limited to *physical* violence, though this is what springs to mind for many people when they think about it. Rather, anything that is used to intimidate, manipulate, or otherwise *control* the victim are subsumed under this term. The other key word, *pattern*, indicates that this is not a one-time occurrence where someone gets slapped in the face (wrong though that might be); rather, the behaviors in question are repeated, deliberate, and volitional.

Thus, in speaking to *chassanim* about the issue of domestic violence, it is important not to focus solely on the *issur* of hitting one’s wife (a point which virtually everyone will accept – certainly on the surface, if not in their heart). Rather, we encourage *chassan* teachers to address the various forms of abuse that are common but that people are less aware of. These will be discussed at length below.

## What does domestic violence look like?

As stated above, domestic violence does not comprise only that which we commonly think of as violence. There are many different ways that a husband can abuse his wife; abusers usually use a mix of them, some but not all. And as rule, abuse that goes unchecked will get more and more severe over time.

On the following page is a tool frequently used in the sphere of domestic violence called the Power and Control Wheel. It lays out some of the different ways that people abuse their spouses. This version was modified from the original Power and Control Wheel to include an outer circle which describes situations particular to the Jewish community.

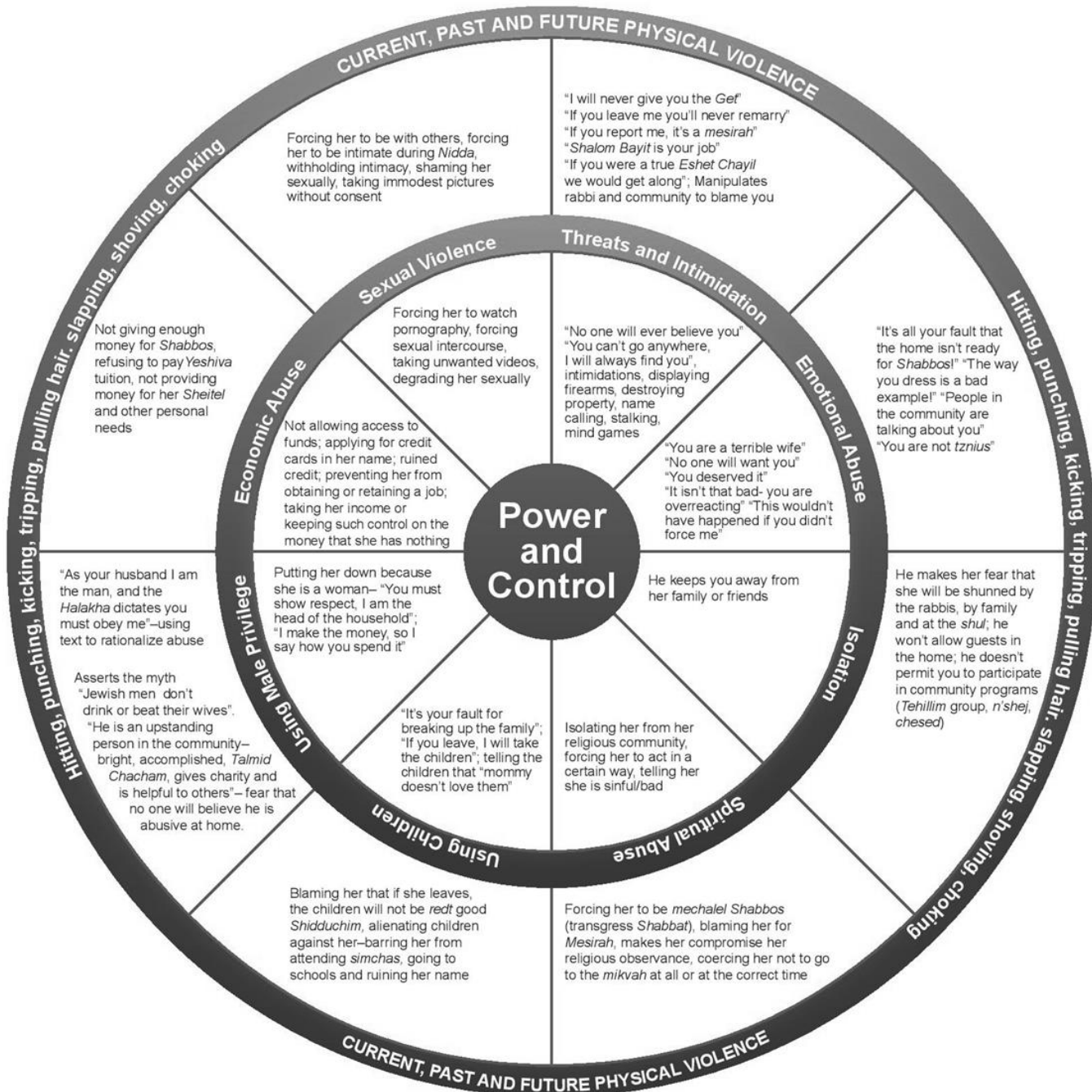
Some of these behaviors are very common in situations of abuse: for example, isolating the victim from friends and family (the most important sources of help and support); insulting and humiliating her (often in public); making her feel as if she’s at fault for the abuse; and others. These fall under emotional and psychological abuse. So does intimidation, which is of special note because men often fail to realize the impact of such behavior on women. Thus, men must be aware that even “just” pushing their wife or grabbing her forcefully can be terrifying for her – even though in his mind he is not punching, slapping, or otherwise hurting her. Similarly, slamming one’s hands on the table, moving around rapidly, raising one’s voice, throwing things at the wall – all these can be very frightening for women (and men as well), and must be regarded as abuse in and of themselves, even in the absence of direct physical blows.

Surprising as it may be, women routinely say that the emotional and psychological abuse is far worse than physical abuse. Physical wounds can be seen, understood, even shown to others; wounds that are not physical can’t be seen and lead the victim to doubt her sanity and ultimately her very sense of self.



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# Power and Control Wheel for the Jewish Woman



You are not alone.

If you suspect that you or someone you know is in an abusive relationship, you are not alone.  
 No community is immune to family violence. There is help in your community.

Adapted from original wheel by:  
**Domestic Abuse Intervention Project**  
 202 East Superior Street  
 Duluth, MN 55802  
 218.722.4131

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## What can you do about it?

### **Discuss**

Discuss with your students some of the following points:

*Are you allowed to be angry with your wife?*

Sometimes people will suggest that feeling anger is altogether inappropriate. While this may be true for the *gedolim* among us, for the average person anger is a normal emotion in response to certain situations. *However, there is a difference between our feelings and our behavior.* Feeling angry is normal and acceptable; acting on this anger in ways that are violent is not. Furthermore, our behavior is our own responsibility and nobody else's. There is no such thing as "being pushed beyond my limits." A common statement made by abusers sounds something like "there's only so much a man can take." But the bottom line is that we have each been given complete *bechirah* over our actions, and we cannot blame them on others, no matter what the circumstance.

*What are appropriate ways to express anger?*

Obviously, using physical force is not one of them. (Physical force should never be used in a marriage except to protect from immediate physical danger.) Less obviously, anything designed to "get back" at one's spouse or to "show her what it's like" are also inappropriate. This includes "the silent treatment," which is a common response of many men to stressful situations. "Stonewalling" is similar in that the abuser refuses to engage in a cooperative discussion, though he may in fact be speaking to the victim. Passive-aggressive behavior is also unhelpful. These are behaviors in which one party is deliberately trying to annoy or anger the other, but does it in covert ways, often denying any ill intent.

Instead, *chassanim* should be counseled to openly discuss whatever is making them angry. It is perfectly fine to state, "I am *furious* with you!" as long as the statement is made without raising one's voice to the point of yelling and without threatening undertones. Discussing an issue that is clearly raising some emotion does presume a certain quality of the relationship between husband and wife. If someone states that they cannot discuss the subject with their (soon-to-be) spouse, this is a good opportunity to offer to have them discuss it with you present – or, better yet, to go to couples counseling. Couples counseling is not an indication that either party is a bad or incompetent person. Many strong couples use therapy to make their relationship stronger; many others simply need help in a subject that is simply not taught to them in their childhood. This is not in any way a cause for guilt, blame, or stigma. (Note that *couples counseling is never advisable in situations of active abuse.* It can serve to further victimize the abused person and even put her in danger.)

*What is the proper balance of power in a marriage?*

There is a famous idea that the man is in charge of *mili de'shmaya* (spiritual matters) and the woman is in charge of *mili de'ara* (physical matters). This is a natural and appropriate setup, *if it works for both parties.* If a woman hates doing dishes but her husband it finds it tolerable, there is no reason that he can't take responsibility for that chore. If her Hebrew is better than his, they may want to put her in charge of helping the children learn how to read and *daven*.



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The point here is not just that there is flexibility in the roles, but that there is partnership. There is no such thing as one person making all the decisions for the other. This approach often takes refuge under the banner of “*ishah k'sheirah osah r'tzon baalah*,” which is taken to mean that the man calls the shots and the woman is required to follow his directives. While that may have been the expected *derech* in past eras, in most frum communities today it is no longer the accepted model. This needs to be made explicit to young *chassanim* and discussed as needed. The *maamar chazal* cited above has been much misused by the ill-intentioned and the uninformed.

This has a particular relevance to the issue of marital intimacy, which is an area that is frequently turned into an instrument of abuse. Men would do well to recall that intimacy is an obligation for them, not a right, and that they are required to provide for the physical and emotional satisfaction of their wives. Forced intimacy is absolutely forbidden, even in the context of a marriage; if a woman is refusing to be together with her husband, this again may call for a referral to counseling to explore what the problem is. Regarding what the couple does and does not do together, that is a question of the particular *hashkafa* they are coming from, and, equally as important, what both parties are comfortable doing. Just because a man is *hashkafically* comfortable with certain forms of physical intimacy does not mean that his partner is comfortable with it. A well-known and respected religious sex therapist in Jerusalem has said, “‘Normal’ is whatever both people are comfortable with.” Coercion, physical or otherwise, has no place in marital intimacy<sup>1</sup>.

### **Educate**

Teach your students what it's like to live with a woman and what it's like to have a family. These can be especially important when talking to *chassanim* who come from small families or families where there were no daughters. Realistic expectations are vital.

### *Women and men are different*

First, it's important to highlight what is the same in men and women, namely: they also have opinions on a variety of matters, and they probably believe those opinions are correct. (This is in contradistinction to the mistaken perspective that every woman only wants to have a husband take charge and to agree with everything he says.) Women can be bright, articulate, focused, and, most of all, correct! Additionally, women, like men, do not like being disregarded. They want their husbands to listen to their ideas, validate their feelings, and pay attention to them.

At the same time, one should not ignore the differences between men and women<sup>2</sup>. The biggest of these regards their different emotional realities, which lead to a variety of different situational

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<sup>1</sup> I would be remiss if I did not mention briefly the epidemic problem of pornography that has taken root in the frum community. Men (and women) who get addicted to pornography are in for hard times. There has been a rash phenomenon of divorces within the first year, many of which are attributable to men who have viewed pornography trying to convince/coerce their hapless wives to engage in the behaviors they have witnessed on screen. Men who are involved with pornography while married also cause misery to their wives – feelings of abandonment, mistrust, lack of closeness – and in fact it is an addiction that has consumed many lives. This is another problem that needs referral to a professional, and it bears mentioning in *chassan* classes as a danger to avoid at all costs – and as something that can be helped if they are already involved.

<sup>2</sup> Of course, these are generalizations. Few people fit 100% into either category; but in general, these principles are helpful to understand male and female behavior.



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approaches. For a man, problems are solved with the head. There is a logical reason to pick one solution over another that can be explained to another person. For a woman, problems are often solved much more intuitively. They might not be able to point to a concrete reason or provide a logical explanation of their solution. But it is no less real to them than a logical solution is to a man, and it is not necessarily any less correct either – not in their eyes, and perhaps not objectively, either. This difference is the cause of many marital arguments which could conceivably be avoided with a little preparatory education.

Similarly, a common difference between men and women revolves around the decisive factor in any decision: for a man the decisive factor is usually functionality; for a woman, it is usually aesthetics. (This gives rise to the urban legend of the man giving his wife a new vacuum cleaner for her birthday. To him, this is a great, functional gift! To her, however, it does not convey the emotional message she wants to hear, namely, that she is loved and appreciated. For her, a bouquet of flowers accomplishes this much better, even though, and perhaps precisely because, it will die soon anyway.)

Finally, it is important to mention the distinct modes of problem-solving. Men will often retreat into their own thoughts to struggle with a problem, or perhaps speak out concrete steps that need to be taken. Women, by contrast, may solve problems by simply speaking about it with no particular order or planfulness. Just talking out a problem can help her see a solution. This can be infuriating to men, who misguidedly try to follow along and plan out a solution, when this was not the point at all. Furthermore, sometimes the answer to a painful situation is for the woman simply to discuss it, without having to find any solution at all. This is another big point that many men don't understand; instead, they try immediately to solve the problem presented to them, only to find their wives frustrated and themselves getting frustrated in return.

There are many more differences in male and female approaches to any number of things; much has already been written on this topic, and I have greatly limited the discussion here to a just these few points that I think bear the most potential for conflicts to arise.

### *Family Life*

As children, few of us recognize the extent of what our parents went through to keep things going. Raising children is physically, mentally, and emotionally demanding – even when you only have one child. It is worth mentioned to new husbands that it is normal for mothers to be tired, and that it is unrealistic to expect the perfection we might have thought we saw in our own parents. As one author put it, you either have an exhausted wife, you deal with a messy house, or you hire help. And even if you do hire help, it is probably reasonable to expect that if you have a large number of young children, you will still have a messy house. That is normal.

A second important expectation to establish is that normal couples sometimes – perhaps even often – disagree. It is a not-uncommon assumption that if there are disagreements or (minor) arguments in a marriage, the marriage is failing. Anyone who has been married for a length of time knows that this is not the case; but many novices don't realize that, and react very poorly when they inevitably come across interpersonal disagreements. This perspective should be addressed and corrected at the outset.



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### ***Give Practical Tools***

We all know the famous R' Yisrael Salanter that says that the greatest distance in the world is the distance from head to heart. With all the information you give your students, they still need concrete tips and tools to make it real to them.

#### *State of the Union*

It is a good idea to institute a formal context for the newlyweds to discuss with each other how things are going. This should be done right from the beginning, when things are good. (Once things are bad, it's much harder to make the necessary adjustments.) Spouses should discuss what is working for them – “I appreciate that you have dinner ready every day on time!” – and (only after that) what is not – “It would really be helpful to me if you would help me out with the laundry sometimes.” Regular check-ins are extremely healthy for a relationship.

#### *I Feel – When You – Because*

This is a great format for addressing things that bother us. Teach your students to avoid blaming their wives for problems, and to work as a team to solve the problem instead. Rather than “Your constant nagging is driving me crazy,” one might say, “I feel [annoyed, belittled, untrusted, etc.] when you constantly remind me to take out the trash because it gives me the message that [you don't think I can take care of things, you don't trust me, etc.]” A statement emerging from one's own feelings is much easier to hear than a direct accusation.

#### *Warning Signs*

For people who are not so socially aware, things that might be obvious to many people are not so obvious to them. Help them notice when problem signs arise: if she loses interest in speaking with him about everyday matters; if she is constantly rolling her eyes in response to what he says; if she ends discussions with “what's the point?”; if she seems to be distancing herself from him in any way, this is a big clue that he needs to come talk it out with you, his rav, or a professional and see what's going on. It is not natural for a wife to disengage from her husband, and it is probably an indicator that something is not going right. Offer that he can come speak to you if ever he notices that his wife appears unhappy for a reason he cannot see.

### ***Motivate***

Some husbands-to-be aren't in fact clueless, but they simply don't care enough to put in the effort needed for a successful relationship. For that reason, it is worth mentioning a couple of points of motivation to encourage them to stretch themselves and be the husband they ought to be, rather than the husband they might otherwise be by default.

First of all, it bears mentioning that being nice to one's wife is in fact a mitzvah, meaning that one gets credit for it as with any other mitzvah<sup>3</sup>. Some of the mitzvos under this heading include:

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<sup>3</sup> Regarding learning Torah vs. doing a mitzvah, see Moed Katan 9b, where we learn that another mitzvah can top learning Torah if there is no one else who can do it – and this certainly seems like such a case, as a woman has only one husband.



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- *Ve'ahavta le'reiacha kamocha*
- *Ve'simach es ishto* (in *shanah rishonah*, which according to some modern authorities actually lasts far beyond the first year)
- The mitzvah of *chinuch* (since as much as you want to educate your children how to properly shake a lulav, you want to educate them how to have a proper marriage)
- Avoiding *ona'as devarim*

No doubt many more could be added to this list.

There is an additional motivation to be good to one's wife, and that is "enlightened self-interest." While yelling may provide a quick way for a husband to make sure what he wants gets done, it is a short-term solution. Taking the easy way out now will cost him over the long term; it certainly does not provide the foundation for a deep and happy relationship. A stressful marriage means a stressful life. Trying to get one's way by power and control ends up undermining one's own goals; and it undermines a wife's ability to respond appropriately to her husband, to give back to him, and to give over to their children the love and attention they need.

### **A Note about the Victim**

If it should happen in the course of your dealing with a problematic marriage that you meet with a wife who is claiming she is a victim of abuse, I urge you not to pass judgment on the situation. This applies in many ways. First of all, do not judge her reactions to the situation. It is easy to say "what I would do in that situation," but the reality is that from the perspective of a victim of abuse the situation can be endlessly complex.

Second, it is a sad fact that many victims of abuse suffer also from mental illnesses, whether pre-existing or actually brought on by the psychological abuse they experience. Just because a victim is mentally ill, or provocative, or aggressive, does not mean she is not a victim. I encourage you again not to try to judge the situation, but rather to refer the parties to a counselor who is trained in the dynamics of domestic violence for help.

### **Conclusion**

There is much to be said about the problem of domestic violence. This short booklet is meant to help those in our community who have the most direct access to budding *chassanim*; it is by no means a comprehensive training on the issue. If you are a *chassan* teacher, I urge you to consider this issue as part of your educational material. If you do encounter a case of abuse among your students, please reach out to a trained professional for help. Eradicating domestic violence completely will be a community effort – but each of us has our own role to play in it, and yours should not be underestimated.