



The Shofar Coalition

Collaborative Response to Childhood Trauma  
in the Baltimore Jewish Community

# Interpersonal Abuse

## What Can Rabbis DO?

- Learn about the issues relating to abuse in the Jewish community across the life span, including physical, sexual, and emotional abuse of children, spouse or partner, and elders.
- Contact other rabbis with whom you study and offer to host a meeting of your peers to “brainstorm” the ways to address the issues of abuse and victimization in your congregations. Discuss the particularly Jewish cultural factors, law and Torah interpretations that might contribute to or ameliorate abuse.
- Be prepared to listen with empathy and an open mind (sounds simple, but it isn’t).
- Develop a support system for yourself so that you can debrief and get help from your peers in regard to your own feelings and reactions. Compassion fatigue and vicarious trauma are common among helpers (including clergy) who offer support to victims.
- Educate your congregation. Invite speakers, hold study sessions, and talk about it in religious school. Speak out, naming the issue from the pulpit: there are survivors here in the congregation. During services, talk in sermons about the effects, causes, and prevention of violence; acknowledge that these behaviors and dynamics exist in Jewish homes, neighborhoods, and congregations. Let your congregants know that you are open to learning and teaching about issues related to abuse.
- Become familiar with and work closely with resources in your community. Some may be Jewish others may not be, but all are valuable.
- When survivors of abuse make their history known to you (and they *will*, once you let them know it’s safe):
  - Be clear about moral responsibility (perpetrators’, society’s, bystanders’) to contribute to the prevention and understanding of trauma.
  - Help victims struggle with their guilt (whatever they did, didn’t do, felt, thought, said).
  - Address with trauma survivors their need and desire to forgive perpetrators, bystanders, and themselves.
  - Provide an alternative (to their perpetrators’) model of authority; one with compassion, respect, boundaries.
  - Help them struggle with questions of meaning (e.g., Where was God?) and form a new relationship with God and/or spirituality.
  - Provide a counterpoint for people abused by clergy by giving respect and compassion.
  - Help people see the big picture, help them put things into a context.
  - Find and/or encourage self-help or networking groups as resources for survivors in your congregation and the surrounding area.

Adapted from *Risking Connection® in Faith Communities* (Day et al.), Sidran Institute Press, 2006  
[www.sidran.org/rcfaith](http://www.sidran.org/rcfaith)

