

BEYOND SILENCE

The Board of Rabbis of Northern California, Jewish Learning Works, Shalom Bayit and the Bay Area Jewish Healing Center, representing an array of rabbis, educators and other Jewish professionals, have joined together in a campaign known as Beyond Silence Campaign to create, implement and foster a community wide response to abuse in general, and child sexual abuse in particular.

See the Beyond Silence section at <http://www.norcalrabbis.org>.

Nishmah v'Neyrafah – We Are Listening and Healing

We are created along with one another and directed to a life with one another. Creatures are placed in my way so that I, their fellow creature by means of them and with them find the way to God.

A God reached by their exclusion would not be the God of all that lives in whom all is fulfilled.

— *Between Man and Man*, by Martin Buber

As Jews, history has taught us repeatedly of the complex, often paradoxical, nature of silence and speaking. As a collective people we have known the power of breaking silence and giving voice to abuse and trauma. It is all too easy to fall into the binary model of us and them, good and bad, innocent and guilty, light and dark. Individually we have also been both perpetrator and survivor.

Fortunately, Jewish tradition provides us with a number of spiritual teachings and practices for the necessary psycho-spiritual work of *teshuvah* by attending to the *yetzer ha'rah* and the *yetzer ha'tov* (our inclination toward good and evil). These practices include such examples as *cheshbon ha'nefesh* (accounting of the soul), *Mussar*, and counting the *Omer*, to name a few.

Based on the teachings of Rabbi Israel Salanter from Lithuania in the 1800s, *Mussar* is a series of spiritual practices including contemplative self-evaluation, reflection and meditation for working with our *middot*, or soul traits. The *Omer* is the time between Pesach and Shavuot in which we count the days toward the fullness of the barley harvest. The *Omer* can also be used to count the days of a spiritual journey as a way of staying focused on a particular issue for which we seek spiritual support.

Many have taught that the power and importance of compassion is a tool for healing both the survivor and the perpetrator. Compassion sounds simple, but is actually demanding. Compassion is something we can practice. Cultivating true compassion requires ongoing discipline and the support of a community to facilitate the power of speaking and deep listening, especially to stories that tell the truth.

The Passover story of liberation and redemption teaches us many valuable resources for compassionate listening. The Exodus narrative also embodies the paradoxical tension in the trauma of enslavement and the journey to liberation. It is said that Passover is our physical liberation from slavery, and Shavuot celebrates our spiritual liberation from slavery. The journey from Pesach to Shavuot is the framework for counting the *Omer*. This counting can be used to bear witness and hold sacred space.

Rachamim (compassion) and *ometz lev* (courage of the heart) are two *middot* that can help us to be agents of healing and *teshuvah*. Consideration of healing the perpetrator is a mammoth task. There is courage for the survivor to break silence, and the courage of the listener to hear and hold the truth. We need courage to believe in the possibility of *teshuvah* and redemption, though it can bring our own discomfort. The violation holds a mirror up for our own inner work, as we all hold the human capacity to be both survivor and perpetrator.

Trauma specialist Dr. Peter Levine has taught extensively about the transformative and transcendent aspects of healing from trauma. In his article, "Trauma and Spirituality," he writes:

It would be an error to equate trauma with suffering, and suffering in turn with transformation. At the same time, however, in virtually every spiritual tradition suffering is understood as a doorway to awakening.

Jewish tradition teaches us that every one of us is commanded as well as imbued with the capacity to do the lifelong work of *tikkun olam*. Spiritual care providers such as rabbis, cantors, chaplains and spiritual directors join therapists, doctors, attorneys, educators, and others in this charge. But the responsibility is communal when we hope to bring safe spaces for truth telling, deep listening, and genuine healing.

The Talmudic Aramaic phrase, *Kol yisrael arevim zeh ba'zeh* (Shevuot 39a), says that all Jews/Children of Israel are responsible for one another. We need the commitment of *rachamim* (being merciful) and *ometz lev* (courage of the heart) in order to truly put this teaching and spiritual journey into action.

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If you wish to reprint portions of this text, please contact Rabbi Eric Weiss eweiss@bajhc.org.

Local Contacts for Support Related to Sexual Abuse

Parents Place, a Division of Jewish Family & Children's Services: 415-359-2443

Jewish Family Services of Silicon Valley: 408-357-7425

Jewish Family & Children's Services of the East Bay: Rikki Sudikoff 510-704-7475

Bay Area Jewish Healing Center: Rabbi Eric Weiss 415-750-4199

Shalom Bayit: Lisa Kahn Tietz 510-451-SAFE

Greater Bay Area Child Abuse Prevention Council Coalition: 1-888-904-2272

Contact your local Child Protective Services Hotline by calling Child Help: 1-800-4-A-CHILD

RAINN, the National Sexual Abuse Hotline: 1-800-656-HOPE