



Silence: A blessing or a danger? By Rabbi Menachem Creditor and Naomi Tucker

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Nishma: We are listening. To all who have lived with the horrors of child sexual abuse, we say: we are listening to your pain, your sadness, your stories. We are listening for what you need and how we can help.

But are we truly listening? Sometimes we listen, but we are afraid to hear painful truths – to bear the weight of the story.

Perhaps we hear only those who break the silence – the courageous few who come forward and tell their stories. Often we don't listen for the silent ones. To be listeners, we must respond to the voices calling us, and also search for the ones who can't yet speak. We must open the conversation, but have compassion if no words come forth.

To truly listen, we must learn to understand and respect when someone does not want to speak. A response of silence can happen during an argument with a close friend, in conflict resolution with children, in working out consent during a sexual encounter, or when conversing with someone less talkative or more introverted. As Jews we tend toward filling the silent spaces with our own voice, but sometimes it is prudent to listen to the silence and just let it be.

How can we understand when silence is called for and when it is called to be broken? A Jewish understanding of silence versus speaking out is found in Leviticus 19:16: "Do not stand idly by the blood of your neighbor," juxtaposed with the prohibition against *lashon hara* (evil speech or harmful speech) in the same verse. By pairing these together, Torah teaches us that if someone is being harmed we must speak out – and if speaking out causes harm, we must hold our tongue.

Anti-bullying expert Barbara Coloroso describes this as the difference between tattling and telling. She teaches children that knowing when to speak out is about understanding harm: If it's primarily going to get someone in trouble, it's tattling (ie, *lashon hara*). If it's primarily helping someone out of trouble, it's "telling" – and our moral imperative is to break the silence.

The tenets of *Pikuach Nefesh* (preserving a life) and *Kol Yisrael Areyvim Zeh Bazeh* (we are all responsible for one another as a community) teach that it is our responsibility to act when we know someone is being harmed. The *Pikuach Nefesh* commandment is so strong that it supersedes all other Jewish laws: if we face an emergency on Shabbat, for example, we are commanded to use the phone or drive to get help. When safety is at stake, speaking out is mandatory.

On the other hand, the laws concerning *lashon hara* teach that in some cases silence is the safety move: to prevent further harm to the victim, respect confidentiality, preserve dignity, or prevent public humiliation (which the Talmud teaches

is equivalent to shedding blood, since psychic wounds can be as damaging as physical ones).

Many abuse survivors don't tell because they fear no one will believe them. For others, keeping silent is a choice to avoid delving into something private and painful. Others fear their story will be met with inappropriate questions that cause shame and revictimization – or outright defending of the perpetrator. In a relatively small Jewish community, lack of anonymity can be a significant concern.

Speaking out may not be safe even if desired. At the most dangerous end of the spectrum, those who disclose can risk retribution from their perpetrator, such as stalking, physical assault, legal threats, harm to their children and impact on themselves and their careers. For survivors of incest, child abuse, sexual assault, or domestic violence, the danger can continue long after they are out of the "immediate" situation.

Abuse survivors learn to keep silent. Children molested by someone they know are usually told to keep quiet "or else." This is similar to the threats that accompany date rape and domestic abuse. Yet silence gives power to the perpetrator. Silence isolates a victim in their own private nightmare of secrets and isolation. In silence, you cannot benefit from supportive community, hear that it isn't your fault, or get help to escape abuse.

In maintaining the silence, survivors sometimes separate themselves from the rest of the world. This can cause struggles in managing daily life and relationships. It can also foster dissociative patterns where the survivor can function but is internally "not really there." The silence becomes part of the abuse itself; like a giant trap slowly destroying people's lives and their sense of

self, until they can no longer see the spark of holiness and goodness within themselves (*b'tzellel Elokim*).

Breaking the silence can be empowering and validating precisely because it is the antidote to the isolation caused by abuse – but only if, when a person has the courage to come forward, they are actually heard.

This is where we all come in. Our role as a Jewish community can make a tremendous difference. When we respond supportively, we create a community where it feels safe for child and adult victims to break the silence. If, however, we respond with judgment or disbelief, we perpetuate the silence, creating an environment where it is nearly impossible for those being harmed to speak their truth.

Finding the courage to come forward isn't easy. Every survivor will make her or his own choice about whether, when and how to disclose. Our job—as individuals, and on behalf of the Jewish community—is to make it safe when they do.

Are you a rabbi, cantor, educator or administrator in the Jewish community?

Join us for a communal leadership conversation on responding to child sexual abuse.

Beyond Silence Professional Development Day

Wednesday, November 18, 2015
8:30am – 4pm

Peninsula Temple Sholom
1655 Sebastian Drive, Burlingame

Info & registration:
jewishhealingcenter.org/beyond-silence/
or (415) 629-9841

Local Contacts for Support Related to Child Sexual Abuse

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

Shalom Bayit: Sarah Curtin Rothe (866) SHALOM-7

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

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

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

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

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

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