

## You Shall Live by Them

*Our Parsha this week is Achrei Mot, Leviticus: 16 – 18:30*

The *parsha* of *Achrei Mot* deals with sacrifices, the Day of Atonement and with Biblical sexual offences. These can be disturbing chapters to read. But it is perhaps refreshing that the Torah does not presume that everyone in the Israelite community is innocent of wrongdoing.

The one line that I am going to lift up for our consideration today is this: “You shall keep My laws and My rules; and live by them; I am God”, (*Leviticus*, 18:5). The reason that I am delving into this line is that Jewish clergy are being asked to speak out on the issue of domestic abuse in our communities this week. This line seems the one with the most absolutely clear connection to the issue of domestic abuse. There is a myth that domestic abuse does not exist in the Jewish community. We perhaps need to atone for this myth because as it turns out, “Domestic abuse occurs in the Jewish community at the same rate as the general population” (*Clergy Training Manual*, Jewish Coalition Against Domestic Abuse, p.3). There is often denial that anything like this can happen in our communities. But the Torah does not shy away from difficult topics. When we deny that domestic abuse happens in our communities, do not believe congregants when they tell us about abusive situations, downplay the significance of this issue or suggest that someone remain in an abusive situation for the sake of “*shalom bayit*” (a peaceful home) we can literally endanger the life of a member of our community.

The rabbis taught that our line “You shall keep My laws and My rules and live by them” to mean minimally that you should not die for them. It is from this that they also derive the idea that we may violate the Shabbat and other commandments in order to save a life. This is the Jewish value of *pikuach nefesh*. Or as Rabbi Gunther Plaut writes in relation to this same line of Torah “The Torah affirms life” (*The Torah: A Commentary*, p.885). It is part of our responsibility as a community to protect the lives of our members by doing all that we can to address issues of domestic abuse and to assist those who are suffering any kind of domestic abuse.

At a recent training for clergy sponsored by the Jewish Coalition Against Domestic Abuse, we also learned that every time one of us speaks out about this issue, the phones begin to ring at JCADA, the acronym for this organization. Here is that number for those who may need it: 301-315-8041.

So, if you are reading this article and your spouse is abusing power over you in spiritual, emotional, financial, sexual or physical ways I want you to know that God wants you to live and that there are people ready and eager to assist you. You are not alone; this is not your fault; there is help available. JCADA’s confidential client line is: 301-315-8041. Please call and get the support you deserve.

I also want you to know that the Holy One of Blessing, our God and the God of our ancestors does not support this abuse in any way. I pray for you to have strength and courage to reach out.

For people who might notice something that does not seem right with folks in your community, please know it is O.K. to gently inquire about how things are going and then listen, listen, listen. The expression of care and concern and the breaking down of isolation and shame that often accompanies domestic abuse is part of becoming a holy community; a community that follows God's commandments and provides ways for humans to live. It makes a difference. If you have a building, you can request JACADA's posters with their phone number and display them prominently and also in more private places, such as restrooms. As we strive to become truly life-giving communities, may our actions be blessed.

Discussion Questions:

1. What other ways can you think of to assist people suffering from domestic abuse?
2. Have you ever helped someone in this situation?
3. What was most helpful?
4. Can you share this with others?

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