

Two recent *parsha* reflections written by Rabbi Donna Kirshbaum for Congregation String of Pearls' weekly e-bulletin:

5-sentence reflection on *parshat VaYera*, the 4th of 12 portions in the Book of Genesis.

October is **Domestic Violence Awareness Month** in America, and this week is set aside for *parshat VaYera* in the Jewish world – how might they intersect? This week's portion, *VaYera*, includes the *Akeidah*, or Binding of Isaac – the near-sacrifice of Isaac by his father Abraham. The contemporary scholar Aviva Zornberg, who reads our ancient texts with psychological insight, notes that Abraham is himself no stranger to being a victim of abuse, at least according to *midrash*, or texts that fill in ostensible gaps in Torah: one *midrash* surmises that in his youth Abraham was given by his own father to Nimrod, the ruler of Ur, who then threw him into a furnace. Abraham survives but carries with him the scars of this trauma, and when faced with the test described in this week's portion, has to decide what he will do with his troubled past; Zornberg concludes that Abraham's urge to sacrifice his son is compulsive, a legacy all too easy to continue for at least another generation – but that he *does* learn that such sacrifice is neither necessary nor useful nor inevitable. Nor is the repetition, through generation after generation, of physical violence or verbal abuse among *us*; I know this first-hand, so please: contact me if you need support – we have very good resources in central NJ for getting you the help you deserve.

until Friday evening,

Reb Donna on 13 Heshvan 5771 rabbi@stringofpearlsweb.org

5-sentence reflection on *parshat VaYishlach*, the 8th of 12 portions in *B'reshit*/Genesis.

Quick – which play won last year's Pulitzer Prize for Drama? Right, yes: Lynn Notage's *Ruined*, set in a Congolese bar-and-brothel in the midst of the bloody conflict there. Unlike this week's Torah portion in which Jacob's only daughter, Dinah, does **not** speak before, during, or after her rape, *Ruined* gives voice to women who, as *American Theater Magazine* puts it, have been objectified at increasingly higher levels during conflicts...systematically rape[d] and murder[ed] in the former Yugoslavia, in Rwanda, and in Darfur with the intent to eliminate ethnic groups and to induce forced displacement. The prevalence of rape and other sexual violations in Eastern Congo has been described as the worst in the world. Women, children and even some men are being attacked, often in public and in front of their neighbors. Sexual violence wasn't recognized as a war crime until June 2008 when the UN Security Council passed Res. 1820, a small step toward ending what Jan Egeland, the former humanitarian affairs chief, described as "one of the biggest conspiracies of silence in history." Why doesn't the Torah share Dinah's words or emotions? I hope this particular question – and also our tradition's insistence on struggling with its own difficult foundational texts in general – will help focus our discussion about how and where we might best be of use in our world, now.

until *Shabbat* morning,

Reb Donna on 11 Kislev 5771 rabbi@stringofpearlsweb.org

Rabbi's column written for printed (paper) newsletter at Congreg. String of Pearls, *The Schmooze*:

February 2009 *Schmooze* – From the Desk of Reb Donna

I hope that what I write about this time concerns none of you.

Truly, none of you. Yet it's possible that what follows may be relevant to some of you or to others whom you care about within or beyond our immediate community, a community I want to acknowledge as one of much goodness and kindness.

I am writing about domestic abuse in Jewish homes, to include emotional abuse, verbal abuse, economic coercion, as well as sexual and physical abuse.

As in the past two issues of the *Schmooze*, let's begin with a positive term that is certainly part of our shared *yerusha* [inheritance].

SHALOM BAYIT, or more accurately, **SH'LOM BAYIT** (pronounced *sh'lom BAH-yit*) 1. peace in the home. The Biblical book of Proverbs [*Mishlei*] knew something about *sh'lom bayit*: better is a dry morsel, and quietness with it, than a house full of feasting with quarrels, it says.

If you could get one of your great-grandmothers to tell you about *sh'lom bayit* you might notice her answering with a wince about all the things that wives were expected to acquiesce to -- in order to keep their angry or unhappy husbands on relatively even keels at home. Or you might find her remembering with a resigned shrug how the reality of most women's lives couldn't help but skew the ideal of domestic harmony, since their economic security lay completely in the hands of male spouses or fathers. In some communities, those days are not over.

Various Jewish groups, including Jewish Women International (JWI) on whose rabbinic task force I now serve,* are working to put spousal safety, well-being, shared decision making, and emotional and physical health firmly in the mix of core values that must make up a reclaimed version of *sh'lom bayit*. They are also working with legal, governmental, social work, medical, educational, and religious groups to prevent abuse and violence of any kind or duration in marriages and in relationships of any type or length.

Rabbi Abraham Twerski, M.D., summed up the nature of this problem, one that knows no ethnic nor educational nor class nor national bounds, when he wrote that "domestic abuse occurs because it is tolerated, and only when the community as a whole – clergy, mental health providers, physicians, lawyers, and laity – acknowledges the problem for what it really is, becomes knowledgeable about it, and responds appropriately, can domestic abuse be brought under control."

I hope you will contact me if you have questions or concerns of your own. (In addition to the professional relationships I am building with dedicated professionals at JWI and in our local community, I will be receiving additional training for Jewish clergy in April.)

As many of you know, I like to sign off letters and formal emails with the phrase *l'shalom*, 'for peace'. Now you know more about one of the aspects in which I mean that.

l'shalom,

Reb Donna

*and whose current President is Joyce Rappeport, an SOP congregant.