



## Refuge From Spouse Abuse For Religious Israeli Women

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Sally Oren and Hadassah Lieberman

This winter, we had the opportunity to visit Bat Melech, Israel's only shelter for religious victims of domestic violence, at its Beit Shemesh facility. We spent spend time with the residents and their many children. It was heart-wrenching to hear from these women about what they endured, but it was simultaneously heartening to see how they were building a new life for themselves.

Domestic violence is a phenomenon that crosses continents, cultures and religions. The abuse of power, both inside and outside of personal relationships, can be found in all walks of life.

According to the [Women's International Zionist Organization](#), 20 women in Israel were murdered by their husbands in 2013. Professionals estimate that 15-20 percent of Jewish women are abused by their spouses and that this number is consistent amongst all religious denominations. But while violence may be present across the human spectrum, it manifests itself differently in each community including our own.

The observant Jewish community is certainly not the only population to grapple with these issues. Nevertheless, it faces a number of unique challenges. Its emphasis on *tzniut* (modesty) within relationships is often mistaken for complete silence, leading young women to conflate a respectful privacy for their relationships with the shame, embarrassment and helplessness of being in an abusive situation and not knowing where to turn. This is particularly so in instances of emotional abuse, where it can take women longer to understand that their 'moody' or 'mean' spouse is actually inflicting a form of calculated abuse upon them. Silence in the name of modesty prevents important discussions that form the foundation of healthy relationships and assist women who find themselves in dire situations.

In instances when a woman reaches out to speak with a rabbi or a mikvah attendant, she is often encouraged to return home and "work it out" for the sake of shalom bayit (peace in the home). It takes a tremendous amount of courage for a woman to voice her concern, and it is critical that we as a community take advantage of what may be the only opportunity we have to engage her and assist her in taking steps toward safety.

Research shows that domestic violence takes a tremendous toll on the entire family and that many children who were abused themselves become abusers as adults. Our refusal to address these issues only compounds the problem, and proactive outreach and care are needed to break the cycle of intergenerational violence.

But the current situation is not all bleak. Inroads have been made to the religious community and its leaders are starting to voice the need for the protection of these victims, and the prevention of further violence. The age at which women are coming to shelters in Israel is becoming younger from women in their 40s with eight children or more, as of a decade ago, to women in their early twenties with two or three children today. This is a positive sign that indicates that the situation on the ground is changing. Information is reaching these women at an earlier stage who understand that the choice to leave a violent home is a decision that they must make for their children. This trend is in large part due to an organization that has been fighting this fight for the past 20 years.

While there are 14 shelters for battered women in Israel, ten of them are designated as secular and two are for Arab women with Arabic-language personnel. The last two shelters, founded and operated by Bat Melech, are Sabbath-observant and serve kosher food. When a woman leaves her home, there is so much change and trauma that having a familiar environment with common values is not just a luxury – it's a necessity. Women who take their children to secular shelters can have this decision held against them in the rabbinic courts for exposing their children to "outside influences" and, according to Bat Melech chairwoman Zilit Jakobsohn, many women would rather stay in abusive situations than take their children to a secular shelter.

Most women stay at Bat Melech for an average of six months, during which they receive food, shelter, therapeutic counseling, childcare training, legal assistance and transitional aid.

According to Israeli government statistics, approximately 200,000 women in Israel suffer from domestic violence out of a population of 8 million citizens. Even accounting for the smaller percentage of religious victims, you can imagine that the waitlist is overflowing at Bat Melech where the current capacity is for 18 women and their respective children. (The organization is currently raising funds for the expansion of the Jerusalem shelter to accommodate more families.)

The Israeli government is an active partner with local non-profits in combatting this issue. According to [Bat Melech](#) founder Noach Korman, the State of Israel not only provides partial subsidies for the shelters that rescue women and children from violence, but also thinks strategically about how to best support women through their transition from the shelters. The government recently passed a law granting approximately \$3,000 to victims of domestic violence upon their departure from shelters to be used for acquiring an apartment, purchasing basic furniture and obtaining food and sustenance for the first months that a woman is standing on her own feet. This act has already gone a long way in supporting independent living for these women and children, and reducing the recidivism rate of those who return to abusive husbands.

The visit was a moving experience for us personally and it is important to communicate this message and example to women's organizations, the Jewish community, the U.S. government and the world. It is our responsibility to not only help remove the social and religious stigma of domestic violence, but also to give moral encouragement to the women who suffer and financial support to the institutions on the ground that are addressing these issues.

*Sally Oren is the wife of former Israeli Ambassador to the U.S. Michael Oren. Hadassah Lieberman is the wife of former U.S. Senator Joseph Lieberman. Bat Melech will be hosting events and informational sessions in New York and New Jersey on March 25<sup>th</sup>, 26<sup>th</sup> and 29<sup>th</sup>. Information at [BatMelech.org](http://BatMelech.org) and [facebook.com/BatMelechShelter](https://facebook.com/BatMelechShelter)*

