



## ICJW Bea Zucker Online Social Justice Course

### Prostitution & Human Trafficking – A Feminist Jewish Perspective

#### Unit 3: Sexual Abuse and Prostitution: A Symbiotic Relationship

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It is heartbreaking that both trafficking victims and prostituted women are usually survivors of sexual abuse, incest or sexual violence as children. Given the message at a very young age that their human value is wrapped up in their sexuality, they are susceptible to attempts to leverage its power. If in any case they are being violated sexually, they think, “If this is my only source of worth, at least I can get paid for it.” Once they enter prostitution, their situation is likely to deteriorate rapidly as they encounter violence, drugs and trafficking.

What can we do to prevent this abuse? The Rabbis suggest that it is important we talk about it.

#### Separating the Embarrassment of Sexuality from the Shame of Sin

“[Adam and Eve] were naked, the man and his wife, yet they felt no shame.” ([Genesis 2:25](#)) But ever since our exile from the Garden of Eden, shame has a natural association with sexuality. The instinctive response to this shame is to avoid dealing with it. So too, Adam and Eve hide, after eating from the forbidden tree:

*“Then the eyes of both of them were opened and they perceived that they were naked; and they sewed together fig leaves and made themselves loincloths. They heard the sound of the LORD God moving about in the garden at the breezy time of day; and the man and his wife hid from the LORD God among the trees of the garden. The LORD God called out to the man and said to him, “Where are you?” He replied, “I heard the sound of You in the garden, and I was afraid because I was naked, so I hid.”* ([Genesis 3:7-10](#))

Sin and sexuality are here strangely intertwined with shame. Adam and Eve, aware of both their nakedness and their misconduct, make a primitive attempt to hide it from God’s sight. So too, people instinctively feel that sexuality, despite being healthy, natural and embraced by Jewish tradition, belongs in the private realm. This is even more the case when it comes to sex which is not condoned by societal and religious norms. It is not surprising that the common Hebrew term for brothel is “house of shame” ([beit boshet](#)). But hiding it doesn’t mean it doesn’t exist. Quite the contrary, while healthy sexual expression may belong behind closed doors, turning a blind eye to sexual violence, abuse, and prostitution gives license for it to spread unfettered. For this reason, God compassionately helps Adam and Eve to privatize their sexuality by making them clothing ([Genesis 3:21](#)), but immediately forces their wrongdoing into full view calling: “Where are you?”

## **Abuse on Home Turf: Confronting an Uncomfortable Reality**

Acknowledging that sexual violence and abuse are facts of life is imperative if we are to reduce them. The Bible tells of their occurrence even in the homes of our heroes. The Mishnah brings a long list of biblical passages that some considered inappropriate for public consumption:

- The incident of Reuben, [about which it says: “And Reuben went and lay with Bilhah, his father’s concubine” (Genesis 35:22)], is read from the Torah in public but not translated.
- The incident of Tamar (Genesis 38, discussed in Unit 1 (link)) is read in public and also translated.
- The first report of the incident of the Golden Calf, [i.e., the Torah’s account of the incident itself (Exodus 32:1–20),] is read and translated,
- But the second narrative, [i.e., Aaron’s report to Moses of what had taken place (Exodus 32:21–24)] is read but not translated.
- The verses constituting the Priestly Benediction (Numbers 6:24–26) and
- The incident of David and Amnon (II Samuel 13, in which Amnon rapes his sister Tamar) are read, but not translated.
- One may not conclude the Torah reading by reading from the Prophets the account of the Divine Chariot (Ezekiel, chapter 1), although Rabbi Yehuda permits it.
- Rabbi Eliezer says: One may not conclude with a section from the Prophets beginning with: “Make known to Jerusalem her abominations.” (Ezekiel 16:2) ([Gemara Megilla 4:10](#))<sup>1</sup>

In antiquity, because the Torah reading in the original Hebrew was not understood by much of the congregation, it was also translated into Aramaic. Questions arose as to whether some of the passages might be best “censored”, because they were inappropriate, embarrassing or misleading. The rabbis concluded that, while all passages of the Torah should be read in the original, some were better off not being translated for the general public. When it comes to weekly reading from the Prophets, some parts were best simply avoided altogether.

Of the eight passages identified by the Mishnah as problematic, four of them are sexually explicit:

1. Reuben rapes his father’s concubines (Gen. 35:22).
2. Tamar poses as a prostitute and sleeps with her father-in-law (Genesis 38).
3. Amnon rapes his sister Tamar (II Samuel 13).
4. In Ezekiel 16, the Jewish people are compared to a naked, abandoned woman whom God mercifully saves and marries, but she repays His kindness with disloyalty and prostitution.

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<sup>1</sup> A special thanks to my student, Elana Rothenberg, with whom I studied this text, and who suggested this interpretative direction.

The [Gemara](#) adds two more:

5. Genesis 20, in which the daughters of Lot intoxicate and sleep with their father, and
6. Judges 19, in which a man delivers his concubine to be gang raped and murdered by the Gibeonites.

In all of these examples, the Sages insisted that we read about these cases publicly! They resisted the urge to sweep the shame under the carpet and out of view.

It is no coincidence that all six of these incidents of sexual violence take place within the family unit. There are other incidents of sexual violence in the Torah (for example: Genesis 19 - Sodom and Gemorrah; Genesis 34 - Dina and Shechem ben Hamor), but there was no discussion about censoring these texts. Talking about sexual violence within the family is a lot more difficult than discussing rape by a stranger. Yet, an estimated [70%](#) of sexual violence is perpetrated by people known to the victim. This violence can be much more damaging emotionally and psychologically than violence at the hands of a stranger, but it is far more difficult to discuss.

We want to believe that sexual violence is something perpetrated by “outsiders,” and that our community is a safe space. The fact that King David’s son rapes his sister shakes our confidence in that comforting illusion.

The extent to which we want to deny the sexual violence that comes from our own midst is well documented. For example, Dan Kindlon and Michael Thompson ([Raising Cain pp. 213-14](#)) discuss a case in which:

“... four high school football players were charged with the gang rape of a mentally retarded girl who they had known all of their lives. ...In the wake of the disclosure that the boys had been involved in such an incident, many of the leading adults in the community, as well as many parents, educators, ministers, girlfriends and others, aggressively defended the perpetrators as ‘good boys’, whose lives would be marred by this ‘tragedy’”.

It is so difficult to confront the reality that “good boys” in our own communities could act so abhorrently, that it is natural to explain it away. In many instances, the [Jewish community](#) has chosen to cover this up as well.

In the story of the concubine in Gibeah, Judges 19 relates that a tired traveler turned his sexual partner out to an angry mob of his violent Jewish brethren who brutalized her sexually to the edge of her life while he slept! Avoiding telling this story, the [Gemara \(Talmud Megillah 25b\)](#) admits, would have preserved the honor of the Benjaminite community. Nevertheless, the Rabbis demand that we read it and learn from it. We can easily empathize with a community which doesn’t want to ruin the perpetrators’ reputations. The Israelites felt the same way about the Benjaminites in Judges 19-21. But when we protect the perpetrators, we put ourselves, those we love, and those we should protect at great risk.

## **Conclusion:**

Sexual abuse and violence is a plague in every community. Unfortunately, as result of the trauma of abuse, victims become vulnerable to further exploitation, prostitution and trafficking. The instinct to sweep news of shameful conduct under the carpet is as old as Eden. However, our Sages have insisted that we confront this painful reality head-on. Talking about sexual violence is prerequisite to preventing it.

## **Question for Discussion:**

**Shaming the Johns:** Some abolitionists advocate for reducing demand for prostitution by publicly shaming the men who purchase sex. In the words of Suzy Khim in the [New Republic](#):

“Tapping into the new power of the internet, along with our very old obsession with transgressive sex, these officials hope to wield the fear of public judgment in the name of the public good, arguing that prostitution is linked to far more serious crimes than we ever thought. But by taking punishment out of the hands of law enforcement and placing it in the hands of the public, whose emotions and reactions lie beyond their control, shaming campaigns can also be messy and unpredictable. And the resulting stigma can last indefinitely. “Guilt punishments make the statement, ‘You committed a bad act,’ ” [writes](#) philosopher Martha Nussbaum in her book [Hiding From Humanity](#). “Shame punishments make the statement: ‘You are a defective type of person.’ ” Or as Yale law professor [James Whitman](#) told me, shaming “allows the general public to do the dirty work.””

Public shaming of Johns might be a very effective deterrent, and perhaps restores some gender parity, but it also evokes the return of pillory and, [some say](#), forces prostitutes and their clients out of public view thus making prostitutes more vulnerable. What do you think about using shame as a form of punishment?

**Safe Spaces for Dialogue:** The Rabbis of the Talmud advocate for confronting the reality of sexual violence within the community. However, it is not coincidental they do so in the controlled environment of the synagogue. Our public discussion of sexuality tends to take place in much less protected environments, such as the internet, social media, film and television. To what extent is that discourse productive or destructive? What role should public media have in leading these important conversations? How can the power of media best be leveraged productively?

## **Suggestions for Action:**

One of the reasons that many people feel uncomfortable talking about abuse within our community is because we don't know how to prevent that abuse from happening. Find out more about the [Jewish Community Watch campaigns](#) and publicize and implement their Tips for Prevention in your community