



November 7, 2009

A plague that isn't from the Torah **By Tzofia Hirshfeld**

Violence is the same in all sectors, and the fact that the first shelter for battered women from the Charedi community was established many years after the first secular shelter doesn't imply that there was not a problem, but rather that there was not a solution. The organization, Bat Melech, accepted the challenge, and is now celebrating its ten year anniversary.

It is said that the dignity of a Bat Melech (king's daughter) is inside. But what happens when she is inside, and someone beats her up? What happens to that Bat Melech who stayed home, acted as she was told, and her home turned into hell? Shelters for battered women have been in existence in Israel for almost 30 years, but until relatively recently there was no place that could address the special needs of Charedi women. Rather, no matter how extreme the violence at home, they had no choice but to quietly suffer.

Violence is an international language, and it's spoken by all sectors – even if it's not talked about. The fact that the first shelter for battered Charedi women was established so many years after the secular shelters, doesn't imply that there was no problem, but rather that there was no solution. In the end the person who rose to the challenge was a Charedi rabbinical advocate by the name of Mr. Noach Korman.

This year Bat Melech marks its 10 year anniversary. When it was founded, the Charedi newspapers refused to publish advertisements about the organization – despite the payment they were being offered. Harav Bakshi Doron, who at the time was the head of the rabbinical courts, found this to be a worthwhile matter and put himself on the line to better the cause of religious women suffering from domestic abuse.

Three women in six months

"The organization was established because there was an urgent need for its establishment" clarifies Mr. Korman. "As a rabbinical advocate I represented women and men during divorce proceeding and one day a young woman from a Hassidic family applied to me for help. When I asked her for her address she said she didn't have one, because she had run away from her husband ten days earlier. She tried to go to her parent's home, but they had 12 children living at home. Her mother admonished her, "You are married, go to your husband", and so she found herself living on the streets. I asked her why she was not in a shelter for battered women, and she responded that there were no suitable shelters for her. It seemed impossible, and did not seem to make any sense.

Mr. Korman offered to search through the phonebook with the woman to find a chesed organization that could assist her. However, he soon discovered that there were no solutions for women in her situation, and there was no place that could provide her with the necessary shelter and support.

Several months after this incident, a young and pregnant newlywed from Bnei Brak approached Noach, and told him about her violent husband who treated her cruelly. Her parents arranged an improvised shelter in the seminary where she learned. None of the other girls knew she was staying there. For three months, she lived there like a prisoner in solitary confinement.

These two cases stayed with Mr. Korman. The turning point occurred when a third battered woman approached Noach within a six month time span –this time a secular woman who resided at a shelter. Through this woman, Mr. Korman became acquainted with the staff at the shelter she was at, and was exposed to their important work in providing women with a roof over their head and the emotional support they needed. Mr. Korman was very impressed, and approached the staff about opening a shelter for religious women who cannot come to a secular shelter because it would be impossible for them to keep their lifestyle.

The apartment was filled within a month

Until meeting those three women, Korman says he was never aware of the severity of the problem. "I grew up and studied in the Charedi world and I never heard about domestic violence", he explains. "Even though we are talking about a patriarchic life style, in my experience the basis of marriage was mutual respect. Then suddenly, within a half a year I dealt with three cases – and then I was exposed to it. The violence is the same violence in all sectors of society, but Charedi women had nowhere to run".

The staff of the secular shelter responded to Korman's challenge, but explained that they didn't have any knowledge about the special needs of religious women, and would need his help. He approached Rav Doron, who got very involved and became a central figure in establishing the organization. "He made an effort to help me –he arranged meetings for me with everyone I needed to meet. He made phone calls for us, and simply went out of his way to help us."

After consulting with Rabbanim, a detailed plan was created. However, the secular organization that began with Noach decided that it was not suitable for them and backed out. "I was left with a written plan and a huge involvement", he says. "The plan was for the secular organization to operate the shelter. Battered women had already begun approaching me, and now I did not have a place to send them. I took the plan and approached Charedi chesed organizations – and they all refused. I approached the Welfare Ministry and they told me they were aware of the need, but needed an organization that could be responsible for half of the expenses. So, I established Bat Melech. A woman from the U.S got involved with our organization and took it upon herself to raise donations. With her help, we opened the first apartment in Jerusalem". A month later, it was fully occupied.

Wanted: alternative *cheider*

One of Bat Melech's main challenges is working with the children. The women who come to the shelter often arrive with up to 10 children – aged from 2 to 18. Since boys who are older than 13 can't stay in the shelter, Bat Melech found a vacant apartment the women to use when their older boys come home from yeshiva for Shabbat.

For the little children, Bat Melech needed to find suitable *cheider*. In order to find new places that accept the children, Bat Melech sometimes contacts the high authorities, such as the Minister of Education. Since it is very hard to find a *cheider* that teaches in Yiddish, sometimes the children remain in their same school, and Bat Melech arranges orders to prevent the husband from going there.

Beyond that, there are unique problems which a shelter for Charedi women is forced to face. For example, in order to prevent *chilul* Shabbat, the electrical gate of the shelter is disconnected on Shabbat. Mr. Korman says that one time a violent husband managed to get into the apartment and kidnap his wife under. "In such a case we were forced to face the question regarding the electrical gate, and at what point can we break Shabbat to call the police", he continues demonstrating the complexity, "You need to find out when you are allowed to be *mechalel* Shabbat. Most of these things you learn as you go".

The women and children generally stay in the shelter from one to six months. Despite their rehabilitation and recovery in the shelter, it is difficult for women to re-enter the world they have temporarily left, usually without their husband. "Women can integrate, but it's not easy", says Mr. Korman, "They have enormous financial difficulties. A battered woman with five children, whose husband doesn't pay alimony, can't go to work since all the money she'll earn will go for the after school care.

At the same time, her children learn in Charedi private schools, and she needs to pay for tuition and transportation. There are some amazing communities that help these women and their children, but they still have a long way to go. In every community they'll end up in they'll have problems such as if their children will be accepted to *cheider*, if people will understand them, and if people will be friendly. Women who come to Bat Melech have no other choice but to return to the Charedi community. They don't become secular; on the contrary their faith strengthens them.

Mission from G-D

Generally, violence is violence. There is no difference if you've been beaten after praying or before turning on the television to watch a football game. However, there are differences when it comes to emotional abuse. "There is emotional abuse that cuts deeper with religious woman" explains Mr. Korman. "Most religious stories in this context are around the Shabbat table, which turns into a degrading scenario – a husband who skips his wife while handing out wine from the *kidush* cup and doesn't give her to drink, a husband who puts his feet on his wife while saying *divrey torah*, a case of a husband who would wake his whole family after midnight to sit by the Shabbat table. There is a lot of violence around *taharat hamishpacha* (the laws of family purity), for example when a husband doesn't control his passion".

Currently, Bat Melech operates two shelters – one in Jerusalem and one in the center of Israel, and they are both full. Every year they accept 50 women. They also provide a transit apartment, legal aid department, therapeutic staff and dozens volunteers who serve as big-sisters. In addition, the organization operates a shelter for teenage girls at risk. Soon, Bat Melech will be launching a new employment initiative for women who have left the shelter and need a livelihood. And all this started with one man.

"All this is a mission from G-D" says Mr. Korman. "There is a feeling that a Charedi woman isn't aloud to talk about it, but it's really not true, and that's also thanks to us. When a woman has a place to turn to, it lowers the violence. Today we can truly tell these women that they are not alone".

Bat Melech's hotline: 1-800-292-333 (also for donations). Financial assistance can also be sent by mail: Bat Melech P.O.B 41247 Jerusalem 91412.