

## The Myth: “*All Sephardic Men Beat Their Wives*”

By Shelomo Alfassa

There is a rampant belief, especially among young religious female Ashkenazim<sup>1</sup> that Sephardic<sup>2</sup> men, beat their wives. This is a topic that comes up frequently among Ashkenazi women at various singles events, dating circles and throughout the Jewish social world. This is a real and serious problem. Sadly, the perpetuation of this stereotype is also being continued by *shadhanim* (matchmakers), who are responsible for a large number of Jews meeting, yet they may be responsible for Jews *not* meeting--specifically Ashkenazi women and Sephardi men.

The following are quotes gathered from interviewees:

“I heard from my friends at Rutgers University, that if you marry a Sephardic man you are gonna be beat.”<sup>3</sup>

“I hear racist stuff quite frequently. People take me for an Ashkenazi, and so feel free to ‘let loose.’ Someone at a wedding offered to make me a *shidduch* [match] with a French guy, but hesitatingly added... ‘but...he’s....Se-far-dic,’ as if it was an entirely disagreeable thing, like a congenital disease. Very often people ask me why I would prefer a Sefardic guy, since they are all primitive, savage, and are horrible to their wives...with little education, too much superstition and poor manners.”<sup>4</sup>

“I heard this one girl say that going to date a Sephardic guy is like setting yourself up for failure and pain. She said, ‘why bother’ you know they hit you right?”<sup>5</sup>

Very much like the young women that blindly repeat and perpetuate this contemptible statement, the Internet too has become a breeding ground for such racial myths. A quick glance through a major Search Engine brings up the following statements among various pages on the World Wide Web:

“The Moroccans beat their wives; the Yemenites beat their wives; the Bucharrians beat their wives; the Syrians beat their wives, the Persians beat their wives... it’s in their blood and they’re no better than Arabs.”<sup>6</sup>

“Not all religious sefardim beat their wives.”<sup>7</sup>

“We don’t like our sons in law [Sephardim] hitting our daughters...”<sup>8</sup>

<sup>1</sup> Jewish females of Central and Eastern European descent

<sup>2</sup> in this case referring to Jewish males with ancestry from Muslim countries

<sup>3</sup> “A” a young Syrian Sephardi woman from Deal, NJ

<sup>4</sup> “R” a young French Moroccan woman from New York City.

<sup>5</sup> “D” a young Syrian Sephardi woman from Brooklyn, NY

<sup>6</sup> [unorthodoxjew.blogspot.com/2005/11/second-shelter-for-abused-haredi-women.html](http://unorthodoxjew.blogspot.com/2005/11/second-shelter-for-abused-haredi-women.html)

<sup>7</sup> [unorthodoxjew.blogspot.com/2005/11/second-shelter-for-abused-haredi-women.html](http://unorthodoxjew.blogspot.com/2005/11/second-shelter-for-abused-haredi-women.html)

<sup>8</sup> [www.hashkafah.com/index.php?showtopic=12908&st=40](http://www.hashkafah.com/index.php?showtopic=12908&st=40)

“It really upsets me when people say “oh sephardic men beat their wives...”<sup>9</sup>

“In Brooklyn, it is considered to be an established and undisputed FACT that ALL Sephardim beat their wives.”<sup>10</sup>

“Only difference between shefardim [*sic*] and azkanazim [*sic*] is that sefardi men physically beat their wives and azkananazi [*sic*] women emotionally beat their husbands.”<sup>11</sup>

Many writers in Israel and other countries inadvertently continue to perpetuate that Sephardim beat their wives in accordance with *halakha* (Jewish law), by indicating that Maimonides (the 12<sup>th</sup> century Spanish-born Egyptian rabbi) allowed men to beat their wives. This is untrue. An objective examination reveals that Maimonides actually indicated in his writing, that a *Bet Din* (Jewish court) has the right to mete out punishment, not a husband.<sup>12</sup> Maimonides in no way ever indicated a man could strike his wife; physical abuse is forbidden to Jews.<sup>13</sup>

News articles written with incongruous generalizations and just plain absurd statements further perpetuate the myth. This includes this paragraph from an article in the *Los Angeles Times* entitled: “Domestic Violence a Thorny Issue for Churches” which states in part:

In 1995, the Conservative Judaism movement adopted a rabbinical ruling that parent, spousal and child abuse were violations of Jewish law. Previously, spousal abuse was frowned on but not expressly prohibited among Jews of the Mediterranean basin known as Sephardim....<sup>14</sup>

It’s sad that the writer of that *Los Angeles Times* article inexplicably (and quite irresponsibly) needlessly interjected Sephardim into the topic. Clarification is in order; the “Conservative Judaism movement” is a Judaic-religious system that was developed and remains outside the Sephardic sphere of influence.<sup>15</sup> Assuredly speaking, in 1988 when the “Conservative Judaism movement” adopted a leadership ruling against domestic abuse, they were not doing so because Sephardic men were beating their wives in ‘Conservative’ communities, but

<sup>9</sup> [hashkafah.com/lofiversion/index.php?t7918-50.html](http://hashkafah.com/lofiversion/index.php?t7918-50.html)

<sup>10</sup> “Discrimination Against Sephardim”. *End the Madness*. <http://www.endthemadness.org/cgi-bin/maintest/view.cgi?hasHeader=singles&id=3636&order=thread&conf=1> [Interesting to note that an anonymous poster also wrote: “One leading Rabbi of the Syrian Jewish Community of Brooklyn said that he has not seen a case of wife beating in the Syrian Jewish Community since 1959.”]

<sup>11</sup> [orthomom.blogspot.com/2006/06/study-released-on-ashkenazi-feelings.html](http://orthomom.blogspot.com/2006/06/study-released-on-ashkenazi-feelings.html)

<sup>12</sup> Maimonides *Ishut* 21:10 (See Mail.Jewish Mailing List. Vol. 15 No. 80. Oct. 18, 1994 [www.ottmall.com/mj\\_ht\\_arch/v15/mj\\_v15i80.html#CSL](http://www.ottmall.com/mj_ht_arch/v15/mj_v15i80.html#CSL) for a discussion on this topic).

<sup>13</sup> Devarim 25:3; Sanhedrin 85a and Maimonides, *Laws of Inflictions and Damages* 5:1. (See: E. S. Stein, David. “Did Maimonides Really Say That? The Widespread Claim that He Condoned Wife-Battering May Be Mistaken.” *Journal of Religion & Abuse: Advocacy, Pastoral Care, and Prevention*. Volume: 6 Issue: 3/4. 2005)

<sup>14</sup> *Los Angeles Times* “Domestic Violence a Thorny Issue for Churches.” October 10, 1998 B4

<sup>15</sup> There were no and are no Sephardic ‘Conservative’ synagogues or congregations. In the 1950s/1960s, Sephardic communities did everything it could to ensure no Sephardic groups ever opened a ‘Conservative’ congregation which they saw and still see as not following *halakha* (Jewish law).

because domestic abuse is a societal problem, even one that effects the Jews who follow the ‘Conservative’ Judaic-religious system.<sup>16 17</sup>

Even though physical abuse is forbidden to Jews,<sup>18</sup> the fact is that spousal abuse exists throughout the Jewish community—just like it does in the non-Jewish world. In the Jewish world, it is a fact both in the Sephardi and Ashkenazi community. Researcher Michal Wolf of the *Ya’akov Herzog Center for Jewish Studies*, run by the *Religious Kibbutz Movement*, points out in her Doctoral Thesis on “Legal Constraints on Wife Beating in the Talmudic Literature and Jewish Law” that research shows that while most *haredi* (ultra-Orthodox) rabbinic authorities [Ashkenazi] strongly condemn wife beating, they allow “educational beatings to put a wife in her place.”

A 2003 study<sup>19</sup> conducted in Israel on 270 women, indicated that Jewish women of Sephardic descent were assaulted by Sephardic men some 17.5%. In comparison and in regard to non-Sephardim, some 11.5% of respondents were assaulted by their Ashkenazic partners. While this is a variable of only 6%, the Ashkenazic rate of abuse in this case may have actually been higher, as the study may be flawed. The authors themselves indicate that, “The ethnic background of the Jewish respondents [was] more skewed towards Sephardic descent.”<sup>20</sup>

We can't deny that violence against women occurs in the Jewish community. Domestic abuse occurs in Jewish families at about the same rate as in the general non-Jewish community. “No community is immune: secular or ultra-Orthodox, wealthy or poor, Russian or Sephardic, educated or not...Domestic violence is ‘an equal-opportunity destroyer,’”<sup>21</sup> says Hedvah Campeas-Cohen, former director of *Shalva* (tranquility), an organization in Chicago helping abused Jewish women and their families. Studies show that abuse occurs in every denomination of Judaism in equal percentages. Abuse takes place at all socio-economic levels.<sup>22</sup> It's known that domestic violence also crosses ethnic and religious backgrounds, including Ashkenazic, Sephardic and other Jewish ethnic groups.<sup>23</sup> *Jewish Women International* states, “Contrary to many stereotypes, the rate of

<sup>16</sup> “My gut reaction is that most people are Ashkenazi” said Joann Palmer, Communications Director of the *United Synagogue of Conservative Judaism* when asked if their movement is made up of mostly Sephardi or Ashkenazi Jews. (Telephone discussion: August 18, 2008)

<sup>17</sup> This writer feels it can be guesstimated that among ‘Conservative’ Jews, some 95% or higher are of Ashkenazi descent.

<sup>18</sup> Ref: Debarim 25:3; Sanhedrin 85a and Maimonides, *Laws of Inflictions and Damages* 5:1.

<sup>19</sup> Fisher, Menachem; Yassour-Borochowitz, Dalit; Neter, Efrat. “Domestic Abuse in Pregnancy: Results from a Phone Survey in Northern Israel.” *Israeli Medical Association Journal*. January 2003; Volume 5. 35-39

<sup>20</sup> (e.g., 41.3% of the women's mothers immigrated from Asia-Africa as compared to 20.1% from Europe or North America, whereas the national data are more evenly divided). Most respondents (83%) were born in Israel, and most are Jewish (79.5% compared to 79.4% nationally).

<sup>21</sup> “Surviving Abuse.” *Jewish Women International*. Spring 2003.

<sup>22</sup> *Jewish Coalition Against Domestic Abuse* (JCADA)

<sup>23</sup> *Shalom Bayit*: Bay Area Jewish Women Working to End Domestic Violence. <http://www.shalom-bayit.org/> (Note: Also see a “Bibliography Covering Jewish Domestic Abuse, Religion and Abuse, and Related Issues.” [members.aol.com/Agunah/bib-jdv.htm](http://members.aol.com/Agunah/bib-jdv.htm)) & *Family Shalom*, a project of the *National Council of Jewish Women* (NCJW) [familyshalom.org](http://familyshalom.org)

abuse is the same regardless of socio-economic level, whether they're religious or secular, or of Sephardic or Ashkenazic origin."<sup>24</sup>

Jewish society ought to deal with people who abuse as individuals, and not hold an entire division of the Jewish people in contempt, the later goes against our religion itself. Judaism prohibits people from speaking gossip (*lashon hara*), or even worse (*motsi shem ra*), slanderous lies or untrue remarks. The Turkish rabbi, Haham Eliezer Papo (1785-1828) wrote in his popular *musar* book *Pele Yoets*:

Great is the evil caused by speaking detrimentally about a family, a city or an entire segment of Israel, such as Sephardim speaking against Ashkenazim or the reverse. Do not defame an entire family or city because of a few who have done something wrong. The punishment for vilifying a group is greater than that for slandering an individual...you are obligated to stop people from gossiping.<sup>25</sup>

Rabbi Israel Kagan (1838-1933) in his book *Hafets Haim* tells that one may transgress many of the *613 Commandments* with one act of speaking lashon hara. A partial list of these includes: the prohibition on being a gossip; the prohibition on placing a stumbling block before another (because the one who speaks lashon hara causes others to listen to lashon hara, which also is a transgression); the prohibition on forgetting the Almighty, (because a person who speaks lashon hara thereby demonstrates haughtiness, whereas a person who remembers God is aware of his own faults and is never haughty); the two prohibitions on taking revenge and bearing a grudge; the prohibition on giving false testimony; the prohibition on following in Korah's footsteps (i.e., by bringing about hostility between people); and others.

Domestic abuse does not arise based on religion, race, age or a specific socioeconomic background. Like all epidemics, domestic abuse can only be dealt with if it's first identified and recognized as a social and communal crisis. Domestic abuse does not discriminate, only individuals discriminate--and discriminating against an entire division of Jewish people contributes nothing positive to the world.

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<sup>24</sup> "New Campaign In Toronto Debunks Myths Surrounding Domestic Abuse." *Jewish Women International*. Vol. 10 Issue 10

<sup>25</sup> Papo, Eliezer. *Pele Yoetz*. Constantinople 1824. Translated and edited by Angel, Marc D. *The Essential Pele Yoetz*. New York: Sepher-Harmon Press, 1999. 137