

Policy Guidelines on the Prevention of and Response to Abuse in Kehilla Community Synagogue

Revised May 2018

*“...on the day when God made humans, they were fashioned in the image of God”
Genesis 5:1*

*“The realization that every human being is God’s image makes an unambiguous demand upon us.”
Rabbi Arthur Green*

Preamble

With the adoption of these policy guidelines we acknowledge the reality of abuse in our community. We seek to eliminate it and to promote the process of healing.

The Torah and rabbinic sources have recognized the reality of abuse and violence in domestic and communal contexts. Our traditions on this issue have been in evolution since the Torah codes first emerged. This evolution has been marked by increasing protections for those of lesser power. For example, the initial Torah laws on marriage and divorce entirely favored securing the privileges of the husband (*Deuteronomy 24:1-4*). The rabbis of the Talmud, while maintaining the patriarchal mode of relationship, nevertheless developed new institutions that would better protect the interests of wives. (*Talmud, Tractate Ketubot*). Other examples of this evolution include the Torah rules designed to rechannel a husband’s jealous rage which were reinterpreted by the rabbis in a way more favorable to the interests of wives. (*Numbers 5:1-31 and Talmud, Tractate Sotah*).

These are but two examples of the evolutionary development of Jewish ethics concerning power imbalance in the home. Kehilla’s efforts to create guidelines and policies against abuse are a continuation of that evolution. In our day, our policies must be based on the underlying assumptions of the absolute necessity for a non-violent reality in all our homes, the equality of partners in a relationship, and the non-proprietary relationship between adults and between adult and child. We do so embracing the multiplicity of family forms in our community beyond the heterosexual model.

All these underlying assumptions derive ultimately from the Torah itself. “And Elohim created humankind in the divine image, in the image of Elohim created it, male and female created them.” (*Genesis 1:27*)

The writer, most likely an Israelite priest some 3000 years ago, transcended his own male bias and chauvinism, to recognize that every person—male or female, Israelite or Egyptian, rich or poor, child or adult—shared a common Divine legacy.

Rabbi Arthur Green has written that the notion that every human being is an image of God is the singular basis of all Jewish morality and ethics. (*Seek My Face, Speak My Name*, pp. 79-81)

Rabbi Abraham Joshua Heschel interprets “Divine image” to be “symbol of God.” Heschel asks what the implications are of being a symbol of God? He answers, “Reverence for God is shown in our reverence for human beings... Human life is holy, holier even than the Scrolls of the Torah.” (*Man’s Quest for God*, p. 124.) Our interpretation of this teaching is that there is no way to distinguish between one’s attitude toward the Mystery or the Divinity of the universe itself and one’s attitude toward those who symbolize that Mystery. In either case, what is called for is absolute reverence for the humanity of each person: child and adult, the person who has been abused, and the person who has abused, even as we condemn that abuse.

Kavanah

As Jews we know that if one of us is enslaved or endangered, none of us is free. As a congregation we want to affirm that the safety and healing of every member of the community is one of our highest priorities. Therefore, it is necessary for us to do what we can to prevent abuse and to confront it when it occurs within our congregation. Abuse within a relationship directly jeopardizes the safety and healing of the people involved, and affects the community as well.

Abuse entails misusing power and control. Power is distributed unequally in this society. Gender, race, economics, sexual orientation, age, ability, and personal status are all factors involved in situations of abuse. These factors, and the institutional biases they represent, must be taken into account in any situation where abuse occurs. Even though abuse is committed by individuals, it is perpetuated by lack of community response and becomes a societal as well as a personal issue.

When referring to “abuse” in our guidelines, we include the following behaviors: domestic violence, sexual assault, sexual harassment, child abuse (child sexual abuse, neglect, emotional abuse, and physical abuse), elder abuse, abuse of dependent adults, abuse of people with disabilities, and clergy misconduct. “Abuse” may include emotional abuse and this may, at times, rise to a level requiring intervention equivalent to responses to other abusive behavior.

We know that members of our congregation have experienced, are experiencing, or will experience abuse. We also know that Jewish people commit incest, sexual assault, domestic violence, marital rape, date rape, and sexual harassment.

When situations of abuse are revealed, their impact is often minimized and their cause often blamed on the survivor of abuse. Even today, while many congregations are attempting to confront the denial of abuse, many survivors still do not feel safe revealing their experiences for fear of disbelief, victim-blaming, retaliation, being left isolated, or being excluded from full participation in synagogue activities.

In light of all this, we intend to provide education, training, resources, and support for community members on these issues. We seek to create a general atmosphere within our community that will encourage any abused child or adult to come forward, knowing that they will be supported.

We seek to promote the end of abuse, to prevent future abuse, and to give people the skills and resources to help themselves and each other. We want to develop avenues for promoting safety, for helping individuals learn not to be abusive in interpersonal and organizational relationships, and for supporting and protecting those who are abused. We put forward these guidelines for our programs to further the cause of healing and safety for situations of abuse. It is our hope that by instituting these guidelines, we will begin to end the cycle of abuse for us and for future generations.

Leading Concerns

The Committee Against Abuse, rabbis and other employees of Kehilla, spiritual leaders and all those involved in responding to a situation of abuse will be guided by the following concerns:

- to protect those who are or have been abused;
- to protect the safety of other congregants;
- to do what we can to stop the abuse;
- to establish consequences for continued abusive behavior;
- to encourage the abuser to make the behavioral and long-term emotional changes necessary to be a thriving member of the community, moving towards making teshuva (the process of turning away from wrongdoing involving repentance, contrition and repairing what can be repaired);
- to make sure that survivors of abuse, those accused of abuse, and those who have perpetrated abuse, are treated with respect in recognition of the divine image within them.

While Kehilla is committed to supporting all its members, the safety of those who have been abused will be the primary concern.

More specific guidelines are found in Guidelines for the Kehilla Community on Responding to Abuse.

Action

Establishing a Kehilla Committee Against Abuse

Kehilla reaffirms its commitment to having a Kehilla Committee Against Abuse. This committee of concerned Kehilla members will promote awareness of and education about issues of abuse, and about Kehilla's policies and guidelines.

Responding to Abuse in our Community

Kehilla's clergy, in consultation with community members who have expertise in the fields of domestic violence and abuse, will oversee the implementation of these guidelines, and will work to determine the best way to maintain the safety, confidentiality, and healing of abuse survivors associated with our congregation.

The clergy will help determine how the community can best promote *tikkun* (healing or repair) for both survivors of abuse and for those who have abused, *teshuvah* (redirection for and contrition by one who needs changing) for those who have abused, and *tzedek* (justice) for the survivor, guided by the principles of restorative justice. The clergy will consult with designated Kehilla members who have professional expertise in this field when issues of abuse arise among our congregants. If concerns about abuse involve Kehilla's clergy, congregants are encouraged to go to Kehilla's Board Chairs or to Kehilla's Executive Director with those concerns.

Provide Training on Abuse

Kehilla will provide training on abuse for those in the community who are to be responsible for reporting abuse, or who may otherwise be responsible for dealing with situations of abuse. Kehilla will regularly make education about abuse available to members of the congregation.

Integrating Abuse Education in Kehilla Activities

Kehilla will integrate education about abuse into such activities of congregational life as our religious services (such as in our prayers and sermons, as appropriate), programming, spiritual leadership, Jewish education for adults and for youth at age-appropriate levels, counseling situations, employer/employee relations, and social action activities. Kehilla will inform our congregants of relevant community resources, events, classes, and gatherings on abuse prevention, through such media as posters, pamphlets, announcements in our newsletters, and emails.

Establishing Policies for Staff and Volunteers

Kehilla will establish guidelines concerning abuse with regard to our staff and volunteers. Principles guiding such policies are found in a separate document, Guidelines for the Kehilla Community on Responding to Abuse.

Dissemination of Guidelines and Policies

Kehilla will disseminate these guidelines throughout our adult and teen community and to all new members who join. Creating a safe congregation cannot just be the responsibility of a small group of congregants. We understand that standing by our principles for responding to abuse is a community project. Every member has a role to play in ensuring safety within the congregation.

Review of Policies

Kehilla, through the Committee Against Abuse and the Kehilla Board of Trustees, will periodically review the effectiveness and implementation of these policies, and will revise these policies and guidelines as needed.

Acknowledgement

Kehilla Community Synagogue's policies and guidelines for abuse prevention were prepared by the Coalition Against Abuse, with major support and technical assistance from Shalom Bayit: Bay Area Jewish Women Working to End Domestic Violence, and with extensive input from congregants, rabbis, Kehilla's Board of Trustees, and other community members.