new london synagogue



Coercive Control

Many communities are marking JWA Shabbat this week. We will more formally be addressing these issues in December. But it's always a good time to acknowledge the incredible work of Jewish Women's Aid and the incredibly damaging impact of domestic abuse. JWA are focussing their education, this Shabbat, on coercive control. I'm honoured to share the following extracts from a Jewish Chronicle column by JWA's co-director of outreach and prevention, Ilana Hutchinson.

"Ask most people to picture domestic abuse and a familiar image appears. A bruise. A raised voice through a wall. A relationship that is obviously, visibly wrong. That picture isn't false. But in my work at Jewish Women's Aid, it describes only a small part of what we see. Far more often, abuse looks like nothing at all. "It looks like a husband who always likes to know where his wife is "because he worries". A partner who handles all the money "because he's better with numbers". A woman who has gradually stopped coming to Friday night dinners "because things are just a bit tense at home at the moment". A student who stops socialising with her flatmates because her partner demands her time is spent solely with them. Each moment on its own seems ordinary, even caring. Put together, they can tell a very different story. "This is coercive control. It is rarely one argument or one obvious incident. It is a pattern of behaviour that gradually takes away a person's independence, choices and everyday freedoms. What seems caring or reasonable at first can, over time, become controlling and abusive."

There are disturbing pre-echoes of these patterns and dangers in this week's Torah reading. Jacob doesn't love the mother of his first children and Leah literally cries out for help with the choice of the names she gives to her sons. Ruben is named in the hope that "God sees [her] affliction". Shimon, "since God has heard I am unloved." Other women, the maidservants Bilhah and Zilpah, are pressed into service as wombs for the production of children in ways that should chill us today. These are not, of course, merely vestigial stories of practices long abandoned. It's been a good few weeks for the public airing of the impact of despicable sexual malpractice. There is still so much more to do.

I commend a good wander around the website of JWA - https://www.jwa.org.uk/shabbat2026/. There is advice on how to see signs previously unseen, how to start conversations that are hard, and contacts for additional support.
I want our community – all the communities of which we are part, from New London to the broader Jewish community and British community – to be a place of emotional safety for all. If there is anything I can do to support anyone associated with the issues raised here, please do be in touch. Other contacts are available on the JWA website and for men and children facing these issues, I recommend https://mankind.org.uk/ and https://www.childline.org.uk/.

May we reach a point where every man and woman can indeed sit under their own fig tree with none to make them afraid.

Shabbat Shalom

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Rabbi Jeremy