

The Dark Side of *Shalom Bayit*



When I was growing up, my mother often referred to the Jewish concept of *shalom bayit*—peace in the house—even though our home, inhabited by four noisy children and a short-tempered, stubborn father, was anything but peaceful. She rarely, if ever, used the actual words, but the ideas behind it were clearly an integral part of her Jewish upbringing.

On its face, *shalom bayit* is a lovely concept of domestic harmony between husband and wife with roots in the Talmud and classical rabbinical literature. As a kid, I tried hard to believe in it, but even then I couldn't help but observe its lopsided application. In practice it requires women to maintain the peace by bending to the will of the males around them. Although my mother was a feminist for her time, she still subconsciously bought into the notion that *shalom bayit* was the duty of women and girls. She regularly expressed this to me in comments such as “let your father have his way even when he is wrong,” “don't fight with your brother even if he is acting like a jerk” and the infamous “if you apologize first, maybe he will too.” And just as it was my daughterly and sisterly duty to dance

around the behavior of the men and boys in childhood, *shalom bayit* would also be my wifely duty someday. “Never go to bed angry at your husband,” my mother said, which I understood to mean that it would be my responsibility to make up with my husband by giving in to his wishes. In general I learned that it was my role to accommodate males without making a fuss, and that if I didn't, the resulting catastrophe would be my fault.

She meant well, but as I grew older, I came to understand that *shalom bayit* perpetuates patriarchy through female submission. It can also be a cover for bullying and domestic violence and a powerful tool for keeping the victim silent: The fear of retribution, burning bridges and breaking up the family is more important than speaking the truth and protecting the victim.

This column is not only about the abuse of *shalom bayit* in the home, which domestic violence organizations and Jewish feminists have done great work identifying and combatting. It is also about the shroud of *shalom bayit* that hangs over the Jewish communal world and is less examined. Just as it perpetuates the dominance of males in the home, *shalom bayit* maintains their control in the professional world. It feeds the culture of complicit silence that leads to power abuses of all kinds.

This comes into play in the growing #MeToo movement. In the small Jewish professional world, it's not easy to confront powerful men who have a history of sexually harassing women. In addition to the culture of silence, they are shielded by money, position, renown, friends and staff. Women are afraid that they won't be believed, or that if they are, they will face retribution. They are concerned that coming forward with allegations will make the Jewish community look bad. They often hold onto the lingering belief that whatever the treatment was, it is the “way of the world” and “they deserved it.”

As part of *Moment's* “Year of the Woman,” we turn our attention to some of the women who have dared to speak out in the Jewish community. We tell their stories and examine the critical role of the press and informal networking in expos-

ing sexual harassment. Of course, having more women in positions of authority would be one way to counteract inappropriate behavior. Our symposium, “How Have Female Clergy Transformed Jewish Life, Ritual and Practice?” takes a look at where we are 46 years after the first American woman rabbi was ordained. We interview Sally Priesand, Sandy Sasso, Amy Eilberg and Sara Hurwitz, among others, and as you will see, the views expressed in the symposium are both positive and negative.

Speaking of negative, witches make an appearance in our story on magic, a fascinating journey into a less explored territory of Jewish thought and practice. Along the way, you will learn what differentiates magic from miracles, superstition from ritual, and magic from religion.

There is so much more between the covers of this beautiful new issue: Did you know a Jewish Confederate sculptor is behind some of our nation's most controversial statues? That it's going to be tough for the Hebrew language, which is so intimately bound to gender suffixes, to adapt to gender neutrality? That most Israelis are rooting for the GOP to win our 2018 midterms? And, if social media makes us sin, how should we atone for it?

Back to *shalom bayit*: It is a valuable concept that has the potential to bring out gentleness, respect and love, but only when it is built on a strong foundation of gender equality. I view the #MeToo movement as a necessary step toward that end. So, if you have a story to tell, please contact us confidentially (see instructions on page 78).

If you are inspired by our work, we invite you to attend one of our upcoming “Year of the Woman” events. I'll be in conversation with CNN anchor Dana Bash (one of our 2018 honorees) about women and power on Wednesday, September 26 in Manhattan, and we will be honoring Supreme Court Justice Ruth Bader Ginsburg, Jane Mayer, Carol Brown Goldberg and Esther Cooper-smith on Sunday, November 11 at our gala in Washington, DC. I look forward to seeing you there!