

FAITH RESOURCE SHEET FOR GENDER-BASED VIOLENCE PREVENTION

JUDAISM

Faith Distinctions and Practices in Judaism

Here are some key points to keep in mind as you engage the Jewish community and men and boys of faith in your violence prevention work:

Places of Worship: A Jewish house of worship can be referred to as a temple, synagogue, shul, or congregation, depending on the specific community. Organizations that are trying to engage men of faith in violence prevention work should note that many synagogues have Jewish men's groups, and that synagogues can also be used as meeting spaces.

Spiritual Leaders: Traditionally, a Jewish house of worship is led by a rabbi, who undergoes formal training to acquire this title. Rabbis are responsible for providing spiritual guidance, teaching, and counseling to members of their congregation. They lead religious services, deliver sermons, and help individuals connect with their faith and Jewish traditions. Additionally, many houses of worship have a cantor who assists in leading parts of the prayer service. Organizations seeking to engage Jewish communities in their work should consider including rabbis during their outreach.

Kosher Dietary Restrictions: Observant Jews follow kosher dietary laws, which include prohibitions against consuming pork or shellfish, avoiding mixing meat and dairy products in the same meal, waiting a designated period between consuming meat and dairy, and consuming only products certified as kosher by a supervisory authority. These rules vary in intricacy, and there are different levels of observance among individuals. Providers should keep in mind that Jewish survivors who follows kosher dietary laws will be significantly concerned with accessing appropriate food options.

Major Religious Holidays: The Jewish year typically begins in Autumn with Rosh Hashanah, symbolizing "the Head of the Year" and serves as the first High Holy Day. The second High Holiday is Yom Kippur, known as the Day of Atonement. Alongside the primary Holy Days, there are other holidays that form part of the festival season, including Sukkot, Shemini Atzeret, and Simchat Torah. It is essential to note that Jewish practices can vary significantly depending on the denomination (Orthodox, Conservative, Reform, Reconstructionist, etc.) and the specific community. For example, certain Jewish denominations may observe restrictions such as refraining from driving on high holy. Additional Jewish Holidays include Chanukah, Passover, Purim, and Shavuot.

Shabbat: Shabbat, the Jewish day of rest, begins at sunset every Friday and concludes an hour after sunset on Saturday evening. During Shabbat, Orthodox Jews refrain from activities such as driving, turning on lights or other electrical devices, cooking, or engaging in monetary transactions. The observance of Shabbat may differ in customs and practices among Jews of different denominations. Providers should note that Orthodox Jews typically adhere to a strict interpretation of these restrictions and abstain from activities such as driving, using electronic devices, and handling money during Shabbat.

Jewish Demographics in the United States

- There are approximately 5.8 million Jewish adults in the U.S. (2.4% of all U.S. adults).
- There are an estimated 2.4 million children living in the United States in households with at least one Jewish adult (3.2% of all U.S. children).
- 90% of Jewish Americans were born in the U.S. and 10% were born outside of the U.S.
- Racial/Ethnic Identify of Jewish Adults: 92% of Jewish adults identify as white/non-Hispanic; 1% identify as Black; 4% identify as Hispanic; 3% identify as other or multi-racial.
- Branches of Judaism in the United States: The main branches of Judaism in the U.S. are as follows: Orthodox (9%), Conservative (17%), Reform (37%), and Other/No Denomination (37%).
- Geographic Distribution in the U.S.: The Jewish population in the United States is dispersed across different regions. Approximately 38% live in the Northeast, 10% in the Midwest, 27% in the South, and 25% in the West.

Source: *The size of the U.S. Jewish population* | Pew Research Center 2021

Judaism and Interpersonal Violence

In Jewish tradition, preserving life is of utmost importance. Any form of harm inflicted upon another person, including physical, sexual, emotional, or economic abuse, is strictly forbidden. Jewish teachings emphasize the obligation to intervene and stop oppression and harm, as stated in the Torah: “Do not stand idly on the blood of your neighbor” (Lev. 19:16). The concept of *shalom bayit*, seeking harmony within the home, is also central to Judaism. While earlier teachings may have placed the responsibility of maintaining this harmony primarily on the wife, contemporary interpretations have evolved. Present-day perspectives prioritize the fundamental rights of individuals to find peace, safety, and refuge within their homes, rather than prioritizing the preservation of the family unit at any cost.

Common misconceptions or stereotypes about domestic violence in Judaism: Within the Jewish community, there is a common misconception that domestic abuse is not a prevalent issue. Furthermore, as a historically vulnerable community, Jews hold a deep concern for the reputation of the larger Jewish community. Consequently, the act of exposing instances of violence and misconduct may sometimes be met with objection. However, an important shift is underway. Recognizing that silence can perpetuate harm and prevent healing, there is now a growing obligation to speak out against perpetrators, even if it entails potential damage to their reputation.

Cultural and Societal Expectations of Men and Boys and Gender Norms in Judaism:

According to religious tradition, Jewish men were expected to be the head of the household. However, as societal norms have evolved, these expectations and gender norms have also changed. Many Jewish communities and organizations actively promote inclusivity and gender equality. In addition to fulfilling their traditional roles, Jewish men are encouraged to embody the concept of a “mensch” – a person characterized by integrity, morality, and a sense of what is right and responsible. This expectation extends to their interactions and relationships, emphasizing the values of kindness and compassion toward others.

Engaging Men and Boys in Violence Prevention: Engaging men and boys in the Jewish community begins with establishing trust and collaboration with community leaders. Discussions on healthy masculinity, gender norms, and relationships can be facilitated, incorporating Jewish teachings of compassion and respect. It is important to encourage active participation in promoting gender equality and preventing domestic violence. By empowering boys to embody Jewish values and challenge traditional stereotypes, organizations can equip them with the skills to foster healthy relationships.

About JWI

JWI is the leading Jewish organization working to address gender-based violence through training and technical assistance, prevention programming, advocacy, and coalition building. JWI envisions a world, free of violence and inequity, where all women and girls thrive.

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