

THE LUSTER OF OUR GOLDEN YEARS

by Jacke L. Schroeder,
LCSW-C

Director, SAFE:
Stop Abuse of Elders

WHEN GOLD IS CLEANED improperly it loses its shine. My friend accidentally cleaned her gold jewelry with silver cleaner. It became dull and discolored. She wanted to know if there was any way to get the shine back. I told her, “The solution is simple: reclean it properly.”

In the Baltimore Jewish community, we want our elders to retain their luster! Treating them properly gives them the freedom to shine.

Our tradition teaches us how to treat elders: Honoring (*kibbud av v'em*) and being in awe (*moreh av v'em*) of one's parents are positive mitzvot. One should be mindful of honoring one's parents, as the Torah compares honoring one's parents to honoring Hashem (*Aruch HaShulchan, Yoreh Dei'ah 240:1*). Honoring one's parents means to feed them, dress them, and help them walk (*Gemara Kiddushin 30b* and *Bava Metzia 32a*). When doing such an activity, one should do it with a smile (*Kitzur Shulchan Aruch 143:3*); although one should not generally take care of his own needs such as shopping before praying in the morning, one is permitted to go out and buy groceries for his parents even before prayers. Grandchildren are taught *hiddur p'nei zaken*, respect for the elderly; and it's important for a community to care for the elderly even if they aren't our relatives (*Yalkut Yosef, Kibbud Av Va'em*, p. 108).

Unfortunately, for some of our elders the golden years are anything but shiny. They lose their luster as they are subjected to elder abuse, most frequently at the hands of a family member.

Abuse can come in one or many forms – verbal, physical, emotional, sexual, financial, or neglect. In 2007, the *Harvard Mental Health Letter* noted that scolding, swearing, yelling, blam-

ing, insulting, threatening, ridiculing, demeaning, and criticizing can be as harmful as physical or sexual abuse. The report suggested that when verbal abuse is constant and severe, it creates risk of post-traumatic stress disorder, the same type of psychological collapse experienced by combat troops in Iraq.

Elder abuse can occur anywhere – in the home, in nursing homes, or other institutions. It affects seniors across all socio-economic groups, cultures, and races. Women and “older” elders (80+) are more likely to be victimized. Dementia is a significant risk factor but is not present in many cases. Mental health and substance abuse issues – of both abusers and victims – are risk factors. Isolation can also contribute to risk.

One in 10 adults age 60+ experiences some form of abuse. Nearly 1 in 2 people with dementia experience some form. Available data from state Adult Protective Services agencies show an increasing trend in the reporting of elder abuse, even though an overwhelming number of cases of abuse, neglect, and exploitation go undetected and untreated each year.

Elder abuse is associated with increased rates of hospitalization in the community population. Older adults who experienced abuse or neglect are twice as likely to be hospitalized than other seniors. Elders who experience mistreatment and self-neglect face a greater risk of dying sooner, and survivors suffer significantly higher levels of psychological distress than non-victims. Elders who experienced abuse, even modest abuse, had a 300 percent higher risk of death when compared to those who had not been abused. The impact of abuse, neglect, and exploitation also has a profound fiscal cost. The direct medical costs associated with abuse to elders are estimated to add over \$5.3 billion to the nation's annual health expenditures, and the annual financial loss by victims of elder



financial exploitation were estimated to be \$2.9 billion in 2009, a 12 percent increase from 2008.

Our elders may be reluctant to report abuse themselves because of fear of retaliation, because of a lack of physical and/or cognitive ability to report, or because they don't want to get the abuser, most of whom are family members and caregivers, in trouble. Family members who abuse drugs or alcohol, who have a mental/emotional illness, and who feel burdened by their caregiving responsibilities abuse at higher rates than those who do not.

The Talmud says, “Whoever destroys a single life is as guilty as though he had destroyed the entire world; and whoever rescues a single life earns as much merit as though he had rescued the entire world” (Mishna, *Sanhedrin 37a*).

Our Jewish community is committed to making Baltimore a healthy and safe place for older adults to age in place with dignity, safety, and grace. Through CHANA (a program of The Associated: Jewish Community Federation of Baltimore), SAFE: Stop Abuse of Elders provides interventions for older adults who have experienced abuse, and support for those who want to help them.

May those who are weary and discouraged be given strength and hope. May hearts that have been chilled by indifference be warmed with Your mercy. May we all be inspired with the glowing spirit of Your Presence. ■