

Around the Community



Families of the Incarcerated - Forgotten Victims and the Collateral Damage of Crime

When Sarah walked into the lawyer's office, she knew something was wrong but she still was completely blind-sided. "When the lawyer said, 'Brace yourself,' I knew that it was bad. I thought we were dealing with financial issues but all of a sudden, I didn't even recognize who I was married to. This was not the man I married! My husband was being charged with a financial crime. I unfortunately didn't realize until then that I had also been his victim. Now we had nothing and I had 3 children to support. I had to figure out how to do this!"

By Rosh Hashanah of that year, Sarah had divorced. She received a call from her father. Her husband was in jail and would be held in jail until his still undetermined court date. "That year standing, sitting, standing again while listening to the sounds of the Hebrew prayers, my spiritual soul was not being replenished. My kids were pleading to leave. Entitlement and privilege all around me. I turned away when I saw the ladies that I grew up with. The last thing I wanted to do was to lock eyes with them, being only so newly familiar with – "the look". The fact was, I was an alien and they were further alienating us. "

Sarah quickly became a pariah in her community. "I didn't do the crime or have prior knowledge of it but it didn't matter! Everyone judged me. The next week my children and I were in a serious car accident in front of their Hebrew School. As we waited on the street for the police to arrive no one from the school stopped to ask how we were. I realized then that I had no support. I was a young mother, fairly new to the community. I had no local relatives and no way of providing for our family. I knew it was time to leave." Sarah did eventually, courageously, rebuild her life but she is still affected by that period of her life to this day.

Rabbi Scheiman, the Director of the Hinda Institute, an organization dedicated to helping families who have encountered the criminal justice system explains; "For every person incarcerated in America, it is estimated that there are at least eight other people impacted by the criminal justice process. The prisoner may be in prison, but in essence, the whole family is." In particular, the family members of the incarcerated are known as the collateral damage of crime and are the silent, often ignored, victims of the criminal justice system. Parents, wives, and children are affected by incarceration financially, psychologically, and socially for their whole lives. Though offenders receive much attention, they are not the only ones who need support: families get lost in the mix and end up suffering as guilty by association (Light & Campbell, 2006). They receive little personal support and do not benefit from the systemic societal mechanisms generally available to direct crime victims, despite the similarities. There is less social support to cope with the stress associated with their partner's imprisonment as friends and family and the community withdraw because of the stigma. The partner's absence is not publicly mourned or socially validated; this can lead to exacerbated grief.' (Arditti, 2003).

Rabbi Scheiman: "When a person commits a crime, there are multiple victims who suffer. All families suffer when someone in a family does a crime and often, they also become ostracized from the community. These families, spouses, and children of the perpetrator are often innocent, ignorant of the crime, or have even been abused. People

don't realize that this is happening in their community." The Hinda Institute, in March & April, 2021, was servicing 150 families and children in the greater Chicago area; 30 had just joined that year. The Institute wanted more data about the families being serviced. They conducted a survey in all segments of the Illinois Jewish community to better understand the issues faced by these families—the issues of repeated ostracism and stress within the community. The survey gathered both quantitative and qualitative evidence and found significant financial stresses, psychological stresses, and social ostracism experienced by these families. Many of the women surveyed felt victimized by prejudice in their community including synagogues (13%), schools and social programs (15%), and family and friends (35%). National studies show that these percentages are low; likely because those affected by more extreme ostracism did not participate in the study out of fear as some reported already having lost their jobs or businesses, left their respective communities, or felt rejected from social organizations. For more extreme crimes committed by family members, some women reported property damage and physical threats. Appallingly, the survey found that the issues in fact were even worse for children.

What role do we each have in supporting this population? How can we better support these families and their children? For over 40 years, the Hinda Institute has been assisting the Jewish population in correctional institutions, those reentering society to rebuild their lives for good, and their families. The Hinda Institute- CARES program (Counseling, Advocacy, Restorative justice, Education, and Support) is specifically geared to assisting the families, wives, and children by offering counseling, legal support, financial aid, and employment assistance in addition to coordinating a weekly women's peer support group. Hinda CARES also offers tutoring, counseling, support, and scholarships for the children impacted when a parent is incarcerated. This grassroots women's advocacy group is working to sensitize the community regarding the plight of these innocent children and families with the goal of destroying misconceptions and stereotypes of these families.



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