Old Ways Bring Tears In a New World; Immigrants Face Family Violence

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Body

With the breakup of the Soviet Union, Jews started streaming here from the central Asian lands of Uzbekistan, Tajikistan, Turkmenistan, Kazakhstan and Kyrgyzstan, and they formed a thriving colony in the central Queens lands of Forest Hills, Rego Park and Kew Gardens.

Known as Bukharan Jews, after an Uzbek city, and proud of traditions seen nowhere else in Judaism, they have grown to almost 40,000 strong, establishing synagogues and flavorful restaurants. But in recent years they have been grappling with a demon that seems to have slipped in with the baggage they ***brought*** over.

Back there, Bukharan Jews lived among patriarchal societies where the husband ruled the household and sometimes enforced his will with a raised hand. But here, Bukharan men, like those of many other ***immigrant*** groups, are confronting the realities of a ***new*** land.

Their wives, less finicky about working as home health aides and supermarket cashiers, are often the first to land jobs and, even after their husbands do, sometimes end up earning more money. At work, they see accomplished and outspoken women, and steadily and subtly their relationships with their husbands shift. Some men, already frustrated by their clumsiness with a strange language and perplexing streets, chafe at their diminished status. A few -- not many, but enough to worry the Bukharan community -- take their anger out on their wives.

That is why a delegation of three synagogue leaders set off last year to the home of a 30ish jewelry worker in Rego Park. The man, an ***immigrant*** who had experienced setbacks at work, had struck his wife, a bookkeeper. She had called 911 and the police locked him up. The tight-knit Bukharan community -- still forging its reputation -- was disgraced by the jailing.

"To raise a hand on another person, let alone your spouse, you are considered an evil person," Rabbi Shlomo Nisanov, head of Kehilat Sephardim of Ahavat Achim in Kew Gardens Hills, remembers telling the man.

Rabbi Nisanov said that the husband had claimed that she deserved it, that she did not "know how to respect her husband."

The rabbi told him: "You can talk with words. You don't have to hit."

The problem of spousal abuse among the Bukharans is probably no greater than in other ***immigrant*** communities, said Lois M. Raff, counsel to the Queens district attorney's office.

Indeed, Emira Habiby Browne, executive director of the Arab-American ***Family*** Support Center in downtown Brooklyn, said that many of the problems Bukharan men ***face*** are also common to Arab ***immigrant*** men, who, she said, are also frightened by losing power in the ***family***.

"The immigration experience lends itself to domestic ***violence*** because of all the stresses," she said.

But the Bukharans have publicly wrestled with the issue, holding a conference on ***family violence*** in January and four sponsored by the Queens district attorney, Richard A. Brown. Another conference is planned for May 4, when Justice Martin E. Ritholtz of State Supreme Court will talk about the law and domestic ***violence***.

There are already a handful of grass-roots agencies that counsel married men and women. Although the lessons would raise some feminist eyebrows, the Beit Shalom organization instructs prospective brides and grooms about being sensitive to moods as a ***way*** of avoiding fights, telling grooms to be understanding of working wives who don't have supper ready the moment they come home, urging them to alleviate their hunger by stopping at a coffee shop for a small bite.

"Many men don't want to come home, because she wants to tell him all the problems and he wants to get free," said Leah Davidov, an instructor of brides. "So, in these cases, what should you do?"

Rabbi Yitzhak Yehoshua, chief rabbi of the Bukharans here, reinforces such lessons, by reminding his community that the Torah and Talmud prohibit physical and verbal abuse, and that marriage requires mutual consent, not imposition of one spouse's will over the other.

Community workers say that this type of program has helped reduce the incidence of abuse.

Still, the Bukharans, tribal and intensely private, have not been happy having the problem aired. Many were embarrassed by an article on ***family violence*** in their community in Jewish Week.

"This problem is in any community, especially ***immigrant*** community," said Boris Kandov, president of the four-year-***old*** Congress of Bukharan Jews of the United States and Canada.

The community's leaders would rather the news media focus on the thousands of solid ***families*** and the children -- even those who arrived here as teenagers -- who have gone on to competitive colleges and become doctors and engineers.

They are proud of their 30 kosher restaurants where ***families*** gather nightly, dining on kebab and tandoori-baked bread while listening to Bukharan music played on the lute-like tar and doira (hand drum) by performers in brocaded silk kaftans. They would rather attention be paid to a four-story cultural center and museum they are building in Forest Hills and a ***new*** $7.3 million yeshiva in Rego Park where Bukharan children study for free.

Yet people who work with Bukharan Jews do not deny that cultural differences and the emotional upheaval of transplantation have led to occasional spasms of abuse.

"The problem is whatever was O.K. in Russia is not O.K. here," said Lali Janash, a case manager at the Esther Grunblatt Service Center for Russian ***Immigrants*** in Rego Park. "The same as child abuse. To spank a child in Russia is O.K."

Rabbi Nisanov, who was raised in a suburb of Samarkand in Uzbekistan and came here as a boy, said, "We always have this problem, but now the women are speaking out, the rabbis are speaking out and we're not just shoving it under the rug like we did before."

Until they came here in large numbers, Bukharan Jews were obscure even to most American Jews. Dark-eyed and dark-haired, they trace their lineage to those Jews who stayed in central Asia region after the Hebrew exile in Babylonia ended in 538 B.C. In virtual isolation from the rest of ***world*** Jewry, even the Sephardim whom they most resemble, they cultivated distinct traditions. At funerals, eulogies are delivered in song, and for seven days afterward friends gather in restaurants to raise money to support the grieving ***family***. On Friday nights, instead of gefilte fish, they eat fried fish in garlic sauce.

In central Asia, they developed a clannish culture where blood relatives lived around a courtyard and the husband's mother was often the dominant woman in a household.

"The men would get anger and frustration out at their wives and the next day they would kiss her and ***bring*** her flowers," recalled Lana Levitin, the Bukharan congress' cultural chairwoman who runs workshops on women's legal rights through her organization, ***World*** of Women ***Immigrants***. "The man wasn't ostracized. The mother-in-law would say, 'Aren't you happy when he buys you something? So he hits you once or twice; it's not a big deal. If you take his love, you can take his abuse.' "

As a result of the instability that followed the collapse of Soviet rule and worries about growing Muslim fundamentalism, thousands of Bukharans left for Israel and the United States. Although many barbers, jewelers and merchants soon resumed their occupations, many went to work here as taxi drivers or factory workers, and many could not find work.

"There, he was a professor making money," Ms. Janash said of a typical Bukharan man. "Here, he is no one."

Some time ago, Ms. Janash spent six sessions with a cab driver and his wife sent to her by the courts. The man had pulled a knife on his wife, and their teenage son called the police. In private the man began weeping, saying how rotten he felt that he could not better support his wife.

Zoya Fuzailova Nisanov, the rabbi's mother, said that women, intoxicated by American freedoms and affluence, sometimes add to the pressure on their husbands. "She says to him, 'She has a car. Why don't I have? She has a fur coat. Why don't I have?' " she said.

Bukharan women often do not report assaults, fearing they will lose their husband to divorce or deportation, that he will take the children back to central Asia, or that a scandal will make it difficult for the couple's children to marry. But women seem to be more resilient to the stresses of immigration, said Gloria Blumenthal, director of acculturation at the ***New*** York Association for ***New*** Americans, which helps ***immigrants*** find jobs and housing, while the men seem more paralyzed by the ***old ways***.

Ms. Blumenthal recalled that several Bukharan men once sought her help in stopping the deportation of a friend accused of a crime against his wife. What was the crime? she asked. Rape, they said. When she refused to help, Ms. Blumenthal said, "they looked at me like I was crazy."

Ms. Janash thinks the intimate, gossipy nature of Bukharan culture is serving to reduce the abuse problem, with people telling each other that it is unacceptable here.

"Women are more courageous and they take a step," she said. "They don't suffer in silence anymore."

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Graphic

Photos: Bukharan community leaders like Boris Kandov and Lana Levitin, are waging a fight against domestic ***violence***. (Chester Higgins Jr./The ***New*** York Times)(pg. B4); Rabbi Shlomo Nisanov says that the problem of domestic ***violence*** in the Bukharan community won't be "shoved under the rug like we did before." Below, a Russian-language "Manual for Abused Women."; A congregant listening to a sermon. (Photographs by Chester Higgins Jr./The ***New*** York Times)(pg. B1)

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