Sitting in a private bathroom stall on Rosh Hashanah at the synagogue, I notice a sign for a hotline for domestic abuse. At first I am saddened that we need such signs. Then I am relieved that we are beginning to acknowledge that domestic abuse happens even in the Jewish community. Then I am hopeful that another woman sitting there will know she is not alone.

Now it is Sukkot, zeman simhatenu, the time of our joy. The harvest is in. It is time to celebrate. On Sukkot the commandment is to sit in our sukkah, a fragile temporary booth open to the elements. Even though it is fragile, I love to sit in my sukkah, watching the evening sky, the moon rise, and the geese fly overhead. It reclaims a sense of peace, wholeness. It wasn't always so.

Not everyone feels joy at Sukkot. If you are sitting in that bathroom stall, reading that sign, scared to go home, you may be thinking "what does this joy have to do with me? Does Judaism have anything to offer me?" Yes!

On Sukkot, we have an extra reading, Ecclesiastes, which offers another message. Sometimes joy isn't the only response. And that is OK, even wise. "The heart of the wise in is the house of mourning, but the heart of fools is in the house of joy" (7:4). Rashi and Ibn-Ezra explain that the verse means that those that are truly wise are aware of their mortality and that joy is fleeting.

Ecclesiastes teaches something else as well. There is nothing new under the sun. In phrases made famous by the song, "Turn, Turn, Turn," it teaches there is a time to be born and a time to die. A time to embrace and a time to refrain from embracing. A time of war and a time of peace. Good things and bad things happen. It also tells us that there is a time for everything (See Ecclesiastes, chapter 3).

Now you may want to scream, "There is no appropriate time for domestic violence, for rape, for murder!" Ecclesiastes isn't condoning everything. It is acknowledging that there is good and bad and that it is not new. It is like the sign in the bathroom. Domestic violence and rape happen. It is not new. We acknowledge that it exists and as a community provide support, and actively work to prevent it. We train clergy, staff, educators, mikveh guides to recognize the signs of abuse. We provide a safe, confidential, non-judgmental response. That brings us comfort. We are not alone. You are not alone.

Sukkot falls during October this year, and October is National Domestic Violence Awareness Month. I am sad that we need such a month but the statistics are daunting. According to the Centers for Disease Control, intimate partner violence results in nearly 2 million injuries and 1300 deaths nationwide per year. 85% of the victims are women. One out of four women report being abused by a partner. It doesn't matter what ethnic
group, what socio-economic strata, what educational level you have attained. It exists in all segments of the Jewish community.

Domestic violence isn’t always easy to spot. Domestic violence is a pattern of behavior an abuser uses against a victim to exert power and control. This can include physical, sexual, psychological, spiritual and/or financial abuse.

Judaism does have resources to offer survivors. There is a richness and depth in our tradition that can provide strength and courage and turn our darkness into joy. It isn’t easy. It takes work. One of my favorite prayers is the Hashkivenu. We ask "Ufros aleinu sukkat sh’lomekha, Spread over us the shelter, the sukkah of Your peace." These four words acknowledge that peace is fragile and comes from God. Sometimes life, safety and security themselves are fragile. The rabbis recognized this when they composed Hashkivenu as the extra blessing in the evening service, a time when people might be afraid of the night. Those fears persist today.

Using this as a framework, Jewish Women International included that image in their misheberakh prayer. "May those who have been harmed find pathways to understanding and wholeness and those who have caused harm find their way to repentance and peace. May our community be a source of support for those who have suffered in silence or shame. May those whose homes have become places of danger find their way to a sukkat shalom, a shelter of safety."

May this become Your will as we celebrate Sukkot. Then when we sit in our sukkah or even in our bathroom, it will be a zeman simhatenu, the time of our joy. Amen.

If you are being abused and need support, or know someone being abused, or you are clergy needing resources call the National Domestic Violence Hotline, 1-800-799-SAFE (7233). The Shalom Task Force, 888-883-2323 www.shalomtaskforce.com offers referrals to specifically Jewish programs in your local community.

Rabbi Margaret Frisch Klein is a graduate of the Academy for Jewish Religion. She serves as the Principal of Congregation Beth Israel in Andover, MA and on the Jewish Domestic Violence Coalition. She blogs as the Energizer Rabbi at http://web.me.com/rebfrischklein/The_Energizer_Rabbi/Blog/Blog.html

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Yasher ko’ah to Rabbi Margaret Frisch Klein for her D’var Torah. Please help maintain the flow of these living waters by accepting the opportunity to share your Torah insights with us all. To do so, please email me at the address below.

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