

Sex Abuse

by: Rabbi Jeremy Rosen

A recent book [Tempest in the Temple: Jewish Communities and Child Sex Scandals \(Brandeis Series in American Jewish History, Culture, & Life\)](#), contains essays from a wide range of professional and rabbinical contributors. They highlight the issues and the tendency of parts of the Jewish world, in common with so many other “enclavist” religious communities, to try to hide or ignore serious human failure and avoid facing reality. I am pleased I was asked to write a preface. The current situation is a betrayal of essential religious and ethical values. In practice self-interest and self-preservation seems to trump God every time.

Some communal figures have tried at various times, on both sides of the Atlantic and in Israel, to come to grips with these issues. But invariably [they too are pressurized and undermined](#). New York Assemblyman Dov Hikind, was so disturbed by the evidence presented to him of abuse that [he entered the fray to name and shame](#). He described the pressure exerted on him from Charedi sources as a “learning experience”. The Charedi world is very good at exercising pressure and getting round the law of the land. In a different recent scandal, a Charedi prisoner was given highly preferential treatment because of the [powerful influence of a top Satmarer fixer](#) whose reach extended to the prison governor.

In a recent case in the USA, a Charedi teacher was sued for sexual abuse of minors. The victim and his family, as usual, were pressured to drop charges instead of being supported. The teacher himself continues to function openly and all efforts are being directed to get the case dropped instead of prosecuted! Over the years ultra-Orthodoxy and obstructionism have been virtually synonymous. Why?

Orthodox defendants always claim they are being hounded because they are different. They argue that social services and legal authorities do not fully understand the inner workings and sensitivities of different communities. And often they are right. I have heard similar complaints from Muslims in North London, blacks in South London, Sikhs in West London, and Africans in the East End. But the culture of victimization, whether used by Jews or blacks or Muslims, invariably leads to cover-ups which perpetuate even greater suffering and evil.

And doctrinaire attitudes on the part of Democratic or Left Wing agencies do not help. Legislation is proposed in New York by Assemblywoman Margaret Markey to change the laws regarding child sexual abuse in private schools to allow for a longer time frame to prosecute. The religious lobbies, Catholic and Charedi contend that Markey’s bill would allow the filing of suits against religious schools based on alleged abuse that may have taken place decades before and might be too difficult to defend and similar legislation is not being proposed for state schools. Why? The answer of course is the power of the Teachers Unions who dogmatically oppose religious education.

This clearly looks like victimization against religion, and as a result the bill is being blocked. Actually, the latest is that petty, corrupt wrangling between NY State politicians has [frozen all legislation](#) for another year at least! So let us not only blame religion!

In recent weeks two more awful cases of sexual abuse have emerged. Both of them concern ultra-Orthodox men, apparently respected in the community. One was sentenced to 30 years for sexually abusing his daughter. Particularly poignant was the fact that other daughters sided with the perpetrator—a typical indication of how people living in closed communities too often rally round to defend the wrong side of the case. In another scandal, a Jewish social services network specifically set up to deal with such problems simply did not do its job and allowed a pedophile to continue on his path of destruction until secular authorities finally stepped in. The culture of self-protection is perpetuated. And it is not just over this issue.

A [recent piece in The Forward](#) paper asked for responses from Jews of different denominations a year after the notorious Rubashkin scandal in Postville, where the Orthodox owners had been abusing not only kosher practice but also civil law. The Charedi respondent focussed on the unfair prosecution and the victimization of the Rubashkins. The others were more concerned with ethical issues, immigration abuse, improper employment and management, and other examples that have besmirched Orthodoxy, in other words chillul HaShem, desecrating the good name of Heaven and Israel. Once again the self-protective mechanisms lock into place and other issues are sidelined.

There are at last signs that the Charedi community is waking up to how much damage it is doing to itself by defending the indefensible and by not coming out with unambiguous condemnation. In Israel the courts have intervened both to prosecute and extradite sexual abusers. But sadly, none of this will amount to anything as long as a mindset continues to exist within much of the Charedi community that rubbishes anything that come from outside it, encourages evasion and deception in dealing with governmental agencies, and victimizes those who speak out (like beating them up on the streets of Stamford Hill). And indeed until pork barrel politics stops exchanging favors for votes. Until these issues are addressed, more and more human souls will be damaged and the perpetrators protected by those who ought to be dealing with them.

So much in life is about perception. Even if some Orthodox objection to aspects of bills might be understandable, the public perception once again is that the God Squad rallies round to protect itself, even at the expense of its own victims. This cannot do religion any good at all. It is just the same with issues such as the [Aguna](#) or Divorce Law. All Orthodoxy is seen as doing is obstructing. It needs rather to be shouting from the rooftops that the situation is intolerable and its religious leaders will not stand for it.

It is indeed a matter of PR. You see it in Israel's public response, too. Instead of saying, "Yes we absolutely want and are committed to peace", and then raise valid qualifications, they consistently say things like, "No peace until..." Just as rabbis like to say, "No you can't, it's forbidden", and then

find themselves having to qualify or clarify. Imagine if every lover started off a profession of love with, "These are things that are wrong with you, but and nevertheless, I love you!!!"

The hopeful side is that the more publicity, the more books and documentation that expose the problem, the more the chances of change, however slowly the wheels turn.