



Journal

Fall 2000 — Tishrei 5761

• WE WISH YOU ALL A HAPPY AND SWEET NEW YEAR •

Thanking God Who Has Made Me a Woman...

By Belda Lindenbaum

Each time allegations of sexual abuse surface in the Jewish community I find that neither surprise nor shock are among the emotions I experience. While they may appear aberrant, cases of sexual abuse stem from negative attitudes towards women's bodies that have existed widely in society and culture. These attitudes are subtle, yet pervasive, insinuating themselves into language, law, custom and gender relationships. They explain why women have a deep-seated sense of vulnerability about their bodies. They explain why women in some societies are given in marriage without their consent to men they neither know nor love, why rape, despite laws to the contrary, is a feature of war; why young daughters are victims of incest; why teen age girls can be kidnapped or sold for sexual trafficking; and why American parents, regardless of class and location, must worry more about their daughters coming home after dark than about their sons.

To be sure, all of this is far distant from the specifics of the allegations, yet any act of abuse is linked to a continuum of deeply ingrained attitudes towards women's bodies to which a sick mind can connect. Perhaps the most chilling aspect of a recent case involving allegations of sexual and emotional harassment of teens by a prominent youth leader is that the men overseeing the leader are alleged to have dismissed the explicit testimony of several

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From Our President The Soul of Halakha

By Blu Greenberg



This is the season of *teshuva*, of repentance and of turning one's life in new directions.

On a communal level *teshuva* means reorienting our values and reordering priorities. In this spirit, we devote the JOFA Journal to the Lanner case.

An important youth leader, Rabbi Baruch Lanner has been accused of sexually harassing girls and physically abusing boys. The allegations against Lanner are compounded by accusations that those who had the power to protect the victims did not take appropriate action (*The Jewish Week*, June 23, 2000).

Questions of whether Lanner is guilty and whether his superiors were aware of the allegations but remained passive are the substance of an investigative commission. Regardless of their findings (JOFA bases itself upon reports in *The Jewish Week* and does not take a position on the guilt of Lanner or his organization), we must explore the questions that will likely remain beyond the purview of the commission — the "why" questions.

One such question regards oversight. It hangs disquietingly in the air, for it cuts deeper than the story of one alleged abuser. As a community,

we must ask what principles or mind-set might enable Jewish leaders to turn a deaf ear to young victims and hear only the accused. When the accused is viewed not only as a charismatic leader, but also as a *talmid hakham* — a Torah scholar, we find that some in our community apply a different standard of accountability.

There are several signs of this double standard. One is the accusation that defaming a *talmid hakham* constitutes *lashon hara* (slander). Another is the charge that disclosing the aberrant behavior of an individual who represents Judaism amounts to a *hillul Hashem*, a desecration of God's name. Third is talk of the intervention of *daas Torah* in establishing a differential set of parameters of confidentiality and responsibility for a *talmid hakham*.

Perforce we must ask: Is it merely collegiality or is there a basis in our sacred texts for judging an errant *talmid hakham* by a different set of rules? One would imagine that a rabbi and purveyor of Torah would be held to a higher moral standard, a more rigorous public accountability, not a lesser one. Indeed, one can find numerous text references that hold leaders to a higher standard.¹ Yet there is also a strand in our tradition that permits covering up the sins of a *talmid hakham* as well as disciplining him less stringently.² Regrettably, many of those

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Thanking God...

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women, as reported in *The Jewish Week*. If investigation proves the allegations to be true, then in their inaction these men subtly connected themselves to the continuum of degradation of women's bodies.

We must break through this chain of vulnerability. That is where our Torah community comes in. It is time for us to take the lead, beginning with reexamination of our own sacred texts, to discover where in practice they engender unhealthy attitudes towards women's bodies. We can be doctors, lawyers and executives in the secular world, but in the context of our Jewish lives we are "acquired" (*kinyan*) in marriage and can not initiate divorce. *Mekhit-zot* are built far higher than the

halakha requires, so that men will not be distracted by the sensuality of our bodies. Our menstrual blood is frightening and unclean, and we become frightening and unclean.

Attitudes towards women's bodies do not stand by themselves, but are linked to negative attitudes towards women's spirits and souls and minds and emotions. Like a Scherezade, I could recount a thousand and one indignities that Orthodox Jewish women have visited upon them in their daily lives. From an early age boys are taught covertly and overtly to trivialize women and their role in Jewish society. We are told it is only a case of mathematics, men make a quorum of ten and women do not. But all too often this simple arithmetic leads to a complex exclusion from synagogue, study hall and religious ritual. Go to almost any synagogue and when a girl is named *Takhanun* is recited despite the *simba*. Attend a *zeved habat*, a welcoming ceremony for the birth of a girl, and it concludes with the hope that the next child will be a son. Try to deal with a recalcitrant husband and you will soon understand the reality that women simply don't count for too much. It is a reality that together, men and women must change.

No case of sexual abuse or

harassment is isolated. Each results from a deep flaw in our community. It behooves us, and especially those of us who hold the interpretive keys, to examine all laws that place women in a lesser light or disadvantaged position. These include legal rulings in which women are treated as "less equal" than men; issues of women's voice and presence; issues of gender language. Different or distinctive gender roles are legitimate, but cases in which women's lives or intrinsic dignity is less valued must be corrected. We are all, girls and boys, men and women, made in God's image. As a religious community we must be leaders in protecting the daughters of Israel and all the daughters of the world from forevermore fearing violation of the sanctity of their bodies and souls.

In the morning prayers each day we call upon God who heals the broken hearted and binds up their wounds. It is my hope that all who are hurt and damaged will experience the fullness of this blessing. ■

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The Soul of Halakha

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who hold the interpretative keys to *halakha* have chosen to lean on the former, on those sources which offer leeway to cover and whitewash misdeeds of a leader.

Something is terribly wrong with this picture. An emphasis on legal detail divorced from the humanity of the *halakha* negates the true purposes of *halakha*; to develop a relationship with God, to love one's neighbor as oneself, to improve the world. The process of bifurcation applies to issues concerning women as well.

That the *agunah's* cries carry less weight than purely legal or

procedural issues dramatizes not only the failure of religious creativity but also the disembodiment of *halakha* and its disconnection from a woman's trauma. We should be concerned that the next generation of *talmidei hakhamim* are trained not only to apply legal structures, but to attend to the human suffering behind the questions.

How can we increasingly restore the humanity to the *halakbic* enterprise? We must search for ways everywhere. One way is to bring women more fully into the halls of learning, and religious and communal authority. If women were involved in scrutiny and oversight of leaders when

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Prisons of Thought

Excerpts from a sermon, delivered Parshat Shelach 5760 at Congregation Kehilath Jeshurun

By Joshua Cypess

Promised the land of milk of honey, in *parshat Shelach* the Jews reject God after hearing the evil report of the ten spies. How could the Jewish people favor the negative report of the spies over the prophecies of God? If we understand why the spies were so convincing we can make sense of this betrayal. When God commanded Moshe to send a man from each tribe, God stipulated that “each one be a *nasi*,” a prince (Bem. 13:2). The spies were not your James Bond-style professional spies. They were princes, heads of the nation.

The book of Bemidbar is suffused with details about the tribes, their numbers, and their leaders. From our Moses-centric perspective these details seem extraneous. But to the people let out of Egypt the tribal leaders were the key to survival during years of bondage. These men kept the nation structured and sustained. In the eyes of an ordinary Jew the character of the nation rested upon the character of the princes.

When the Jewish people heard the negative report of their princes, they were struck by a conundrum: if the leaders were wrong in the present, then they were also wrong in the past! If the leaders were failures and frauds, then the followers who trusted them were as well! The Jewish people reconciled this conflict by doing the absurd. They could not admit to the shortcomings of their leaders and instead chose to stand by their leaders at all costs. They rejected God’s testimony in order to cling to a false view of themselves.

The Orthodox world has been rocked by allegations that an NCSY rabbi and leader inflicted physical, sexual and emotional abuse upon countless children over the past 25 years.

Unfortunately we have become

jaded to the concept that a youth leader could be this kind of predator. What confounds us more are allegations that superiors of the youth leader turned a deaf ear to the complaints of the children.

Whether the allegations in this case are correct or not — and we pray that they are not, we are compelled to examine their general implications. When a Torah scholar is accused of immoral behavior, we run up against the deeply ingrained belief that Torah scholars are also moral leaders. Our first recourse is to discredit the leader’s Torah learning. But sometimes that is not possible. Sometimes one accused of inappropriate conduct is indeed a

They could not admit to the shortcomings of their leaders and instead chose to stand by their leaders at all costs.

talmid bakaham. In such cases, the only solution left to those who do not wish to admit that Torah scholars can go astray is to claim that the leader in question did not really sin.

It is especially easy to deny accusations when those lodging complaints against a Torah scholar are children. While we love our kids, we entrust professionals to take care of them...and out of sight, out of mind. The complaints of children may be even less forceful when the children are girls. If we don’t listen to women, when are we going to listen to girls?

If we consider allegations against a Torah scholar seriously enough to investigate them, how then do we reconcile the dissonance between Torah learning and morality? We must recognize that the definition of a *talmid bakham* must be as complex as any human personality. It is possi-

ble — but precarious — for us to acknowledge that Torah learning is not inextricably linked to morality. Pirkei Avot reminds us of this by suggesting that one’s learning can exceed one’s fear of sin (3:11), and that Torah can be perverted into “an ornament for self-glory” (4:7). It is precarious because we thrive on simple equations. Complexity is hard to maintain as a mass movement.

How then do we demand from our leaders both Torah knowledge and moral judgement? We must enforce these qualities in ourselves. We must ensure that we ourselves are knowledgeable in Torah so that our self-perceptions are not shattered by the notion of a sinning sage. We must ensure that we ourselves are morally upright so that we do not hide from the misdeeds of others. Coming to terms with the sins of our leaders means coming to terms with our own fallibility. If we are distraught at the failure of our leaders, then we must be ready to work against our own prisons of thought when we are confronted with immoral stances that benefit ourselves at the expense of others.

The sin of the spies was the desire to remain in the desert and accept the familiar satisfactions of slavery over the unknown challenges of liberation. To this day we are cursed by that sin and faced with that choice. The generation of the spies accepted the absurd to avoid admitting their own failures. We must not do the same. ■

Joshua Cypess is a rabbinic assistant at Congregation Kehilath Jeshurun and teaches Bible at the Drisba Institute and at Stern College for Women. He is a graduate of Princeton University in anthropology and is completing his ordination at Yeshiva University’s Rabbi Isaac Elchanan Theological Seminary.

“Why Don’t the Girls say ‘No!’”

Michelle E. Friedman, M.D.

Each time another sordid story of sexual molestation of children comes to light, an inevitable series of questions arise. “Why didn’t the girls* protest? Why didn’t they tell their parents, a teacher, a trusted friend? Why didn’t they say ‘no!’ to the abuser, and fight back?”

I applaud such outrage. It tells me that the person protesting has a clear sense of ownership of her body and personal integrity. She is not likely to tolerate violation of appropriate boundaries. I only hope that she is working hard to instill the same sense of self-respect and worth in her children and students. This is exactly what the victims of sexual abuse are missing.

In this brief discussion of abuse I want to focus on two basic issues. What is going on for the molester, what is going on for the abused child? At the heart of every act of molestation lies the exploitation of an unequal relationship and a fundamental corruption of love and trust. By definition, an adult is in a position of power and authority over a child. Incestuous fathers, molesting teachers, rabbis and other adults all prey on the natural desire of children to feel noticed and loved. Determined to satisfy his perverse cravings, the sexual predator chooses his victims with skill and cunning. His emotional antennae are exquisitely tuned in to vulnerable children. He will entice and coerce girls to pay with their bodies for the attention and affection they naturally desire.

Who is a vulnerable child? Like many female adolescents undergoing the transition to womanhood, she is a girl who does not realize she has a right to demand proper respect of her body and psyche. Why not? Several potential factors come to mind. Teenage girls often feel unattractive, insecure and lonely. Even if outwardly they appear tal-

ented and popular, inside they are desperate for validation of their likeability. The need for affirmation renders a girl susceptible to molesters — often respected persons who have an aura of trust and who bestow unprotected, needy children with special attention and calculated favors. A private tutorial or chat easily becomes the scene of a sexual encounter. During the course of comforting conversation, a seemingly benign pat on the head may slip down to a hand on the shoulder, evolving into a caress of the breast or genital area. The girl feels a swirling mixture of emotion, all at the same time — surprise, disgust, excitement, fear. She may perceive that she has a

At the heart of every act of molestation lies the exploitation of an unequal relationship and a fundamental corruption of love and trust.

special bond with the adult and is loath to put it at risk. She may feel terrified of retaliation if she doesn’t cooperate or worse, if she blows the whistle on the abuser.

I want to call your attention to the “Lolita factor,” the insidious tendency to blame the victim of abuse. This pernicious reversal of perpetrator and victim insinuates that by being overly seductive in her clothing or manner, the molested girl is really a lascivious nymphet responsible for her own degradation. Suggesting that a girl is “looking for trouble” is fundamentally wrong. Even when a victim is erotically aroused by her abuser, we must remember that children can never be consensual partners in sex with adults.

** While I use female pronouns for clarity, please remember that boys are also victims of sexual abuse.*

The truth is that all normal, healthy children have erotic fantasies and feelings. This is not a comfortable fact for many parents who view masturbation, curiosity about the body, and other evidence of sensual stirrings as dirty and even anti-religious. Attitudes of dismay, shock or horror about children’s erotic lives inevitably shut down open discussion in which girls can develop appropriate, healthy relationships with their own bodies. I have treated a number of young Orthodox women so infused with shame about their womanly bodies and sensations they felt it was “immodest” to use the language necessary to document sexual abuse.

A girl who does not speak up about molestation also feels that her words will not be taken seriously. She is intimidated by authority and does not want to be perceived as a troublemaker. Undoubtedly she is terrified of being humiliated or even punished for exposing the abuse. We in the religious community need to be especially sensitive to the stigma attached to uncovering shame.

My work as a psychiatrist has taught me that sexual boundary violations know no distinction of religious, economic or social status. I treated an heiress who was molested virtually every day during her primary school years by the elevator man in her luxury apartment house. A handicapped Hasidic girl was sexually abused for years by her brother-in-law, a situation which continued well into her marriage to the point that she was unsure of the paternity of her youngest child. Too many young married modern Orthodox women have come into my office to complain bitterly of intimacy issues and severe sexual dysfunction only to reveal, on careful interview, their tormented histories of molestation for lengthy periods of time by charismatic rabbis, educators or relatives. Each story is heartbreaking — both for the pain these women have endured and for the continuous burden of the difficult work of repair.

What can we, as concerned Orthodox Jewish feminists, do? A great deal. Starting at home, we can make sure that we are raising children who feel comfortable with their bodies and trusted in their confidences. We can make sure that the recognition and appropriate expression of normal sexual feelings is not suppressed because of our discomfort, often in the guise of what I call “pseudo-modesty.” We must discuss these issues openly in conversation. Children need guidelines to help them deal with tense, sexually suggestive or explicit situations that may arise with authorities, relatives, even their friends’ parents. We need to be careful who we allow our girls to be alone with. If something uncomfortable occurs, our girls must feel safe coming to us for help.

On a communal level, we must demand appropriate supervision of adult-child contacts. Every institution, be it school, camp, youth movement, etc. must demonstrate a clear chain of responsibility for proper conduct and a working system that addresses grievances. Parents interviewing prospective institutions should specifically inquire about the precautions that have been established to address sexual misconduct. Adults suspected of molestation need to be immediately removed from positions interfacing with children. Investigations must be scrupulous while safeguarding, as much as possible, the privacy of involved persons. The long range mental health impact of molestation must be considered.

Sexual victimization of children is an ancient problem. Rather than expect to stamp it out, we should work on how best to recognize abuse and deal with it when it does happen. ■

Michelle Friedman M.D. is an Assistant Clinical Professor of Psychiatry at the Mt. Sinai Hospital and Medical Center. She is also on staff at the Columbia University Center for Psychoanalytic Study and Research. Dr. Friedman maintains a private practice in New York City.

Preventing Abuse: What Schools, Youth Groups, and Camps Can Do

The following is a list of general policies that should be enacted in all youth organizations. Parents should contact individual organizations to inquire about the specifics of their abuse-prevention policy. If your child’s organization does not have a set policy, urge it to develop one immediately.

- Set written policy of acceptable and non-acceptable behavior to be signed by all staff and distributed to parents. Examples of unacceptable behavior are suggestive body language, over familiarity with youth, inappropriate language, and denigration of parental authority.
- Run in-service programs for staff to increase sensitivity and awareness about issues of abuse. A mental health professional should be present to discuss the long-term effects of abuse.
- Screen staff carefully before hiring. Conduct extensive interviews and call all available references, even for short-term or intermittent jobs.
- Run seminars for youth educating them to recognize various forms of abuse and informing them whom to contact if they become victims of abuse.
- Hire a full time psychologist to address emotional problems of youth and to serve as a confidential contact for complaints of abuse.
- Ensure that confidential psychological services or referrals are available to staff so that staff has somewhere to turn when experiencing difficulties.
- Keep parents involved in organizational policy making and staffing.
- Establish a mechanism to review staff regularly. The director or personnel department should regularly review staff to ensure that they are complying with the code of acceptable behavior.
- Recognize that abuse takes many forms — sexual, physical, emotional, and that all must be dealt with seriously.

וְעַל כָּל אֵלֶּים אֱלֹהֵי סְלִיחוֹת,
סְלַח לָנוּ, מְחַל לָנוּ, כִּפֹּר
לָנוּ.

“For all these, O God of forgiveness,
forgive us, pardon us, atone for us.”

The Complete Artscroll Machzor, Yom Kippur

The Soul of Halakha

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girls complain of harassment they would not likely be asked, "But he didn't rape you, did he?" If women were involved in *halakbic* decision making, they would lend weight to those *halakbists* who are attentive to human feeling, extending beyond strict application of legal principles. If women were fully accepted in the *beit midrash*, we would learn to read our sacred texts in a new light. Walk into a women's *beit midrash* and you will find that talmudic texts concerning *agunut* or rape are read with a different sensitivi-

ty, one that would enhance men's understanding of these texts, and ultimately, *p'sak* (*halakbic* decision) on these issues.

All of these concerns must now be taken up by the whole community and not swept under the rug. *Teshuva* means it is never too late to re-chart a new path. It is possible to achieve many things as a community: to break the chain of women's vulnerability, to elevate the sanctity of an individual to his and her proper level of *tzelem Elokim* (creation in God's image), to restore a single standard of

ethics for the whole community, and to place moral and ethical issues on a plane of ultimate *halakbic* significance.

T*eshuva* is the path to *tikkun Olam*, repair of the world. It is only when we repair our own house that we will be able to influence the world, as God has set us upon this earth to do.

Wishing you, dear readers, a sweet and healthy New Year. *Le'shanah tova tekatevu ve tekhatemu.* ■

- 1 See for example Bavli Moed Katan 17a, Rambam, Hilkhos Talmud Torah 7,1, Shulkhan Arukh Yoreh Deah 334,42, and Yoma 86a
- 2 See for example, Bavli Shabbat 114a.

Resource Corner

Books

Moonbeams: A Hadassah Rosh Hodesh Guide

By Leora Tanenbaum, Claudia Chernov and

Hadassah Tropper

Edited by Carol Diamant

Jewish Lights Publishing 2000

A study guide for women's Rosh Hodesh groups, Moonbeams presents classical and modern Jewish sources along with analysis and discussion questions. Arranged according to month, the topics chosen often reflect some aspect of the month, such as the Tevet discussion of Jewish self-hatred in relationship to the triumph of Judaism celebrated on Hanukkah. Many of the topics presented are of special interest to Orthodox women, such as women's hair covering, modesty, women wearing *tallit* and *tefillin*, and women and Israeli law. With a clear and engaging presentation, this book is a wonderful resource for women's Rosh Hodesh groups, or anyone who wants to embark upon a course of Jewish study.

Web Sites

www.edah.org

Edah's new web site is replete with resources for Orthodox feminists. Surfers can access The Modern Orthodox Library which contains a bibliography of articles, tapes and speeches on topics of interest to the modern Orthodox community, including Women and Judaism and Halakha and Authority in Judaism. Click on the Speaker's Referral Service and you will find a list of male and female Modern Orthodox speakers, many of whom specialize in topics relating to women and Judaism. Scroll to Edah's Bulletin Boards and you can participate in a discussion on the plight of *agunut*. The web site also contains links to other Jewish learning web sites and a city-by-city list of where to find a women's *tefilla* service.

www.orthodoxcaucus.org

A major portion of the Orthodox Caucus web site is devoted to a Discussion Forum on Women and Orthodoxy. Surfers can access a document presenting multiple views on the role of women in Judaism, and can read and post reactions to the document. The web site also contains a plethora of information on the pre-nuptial agreement, including articles on its background, text, and strategies to promote it.

New and Noteworthy

Compiled by **Abigail Gottesman**

JOFA

JOFA has hired Dr. Sarah Mendlovitz to lead its new Advocacy for Agunot Project. The project's mission is to increase awareness of the *agunah* issue in the Jewish community and to advocate on behalf of *agunot* and their children. JOFA hopes that increasing the visibility of the *agunah* issue will result in quicker and better solutions for *agunot*. There are already several projects planned for the future:

- Encourage Orthodox synagogues to recite a prayer for *agunot* during Shabbat services and ask Rabbis to urge synagogue members to include the prayer at candle lighting, under the chupa and when saying *tehilim*.
- Develop a comprehensive resource base of individuals and organizations who can help women in need of advice, legal counsel, mediation services and social services.
- Design an *agunah* awareness pin, (similar to the pink ribbon for breast cancer awareness) to raise the visibility of the issue and encourage people to discuss

the immediacy of the problem.

- Sponsor *yomei iyun* (days of learning) and various educational programs on the *halakhic* aspects of the *agunah* problem.
- Reconvene rabbis to explore ways to proceed in solving the *agunah* crisis.

Dr. Mendlovitz has a Ph.d in clinical psychology from City University of New York. In her work she has focused upon women in transition. Additionally, she has been involved in civil rights and welfare reform activities.

International

Amit women is continuing its Tanach Yomi Daily Torah Study program. Amit provides handy study guides that take you through the Torah in short daily sessions with summaries and contemporary analytical questions for consideration and discussion. Call Amit at 212-477-4720, or 1-800-989-2648 or see the Amit website at www.amitchildren.org

Britain

For the first time in its 240 year history, the Board of Deputies in

England, an umbrella organization representing British Jews, elected a woman, Jo Wagerman, as its president. Reflecting on the first election of a woman president Ms. Wagerman said "It's not that I am leading the army. It's just that the tide is going in that direction."

California

A new and exciting learning program for women is beginning this October in Los Angeles. Netivot (Pathways) is a community-wide effort to provide women with text-based, participatory shiurim in topics ranging from Tanakh and *halakha* to Jewish thought. Classes will be held mornings, evenings and weekends at the Westside Jewish Community Center in LA and at locations in North Hollywood, and will service those with advanced learning skills as well as those with rudimentary Hebrew literacy. Netivot can be reached by phone at 310-286-2346 or by email at Info@Netivot.org.

Abbie Gottesman has studied at Pardes and at Nishmat, and is a member of the Board of Pardes. She is an active member of the women's tefilla group of Kehillat Orath Eliezer, and is currently studying for her MBA.

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