

Missing Voices

Women and the Jewish Community's Response to Child Sexual Abuse

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This essay is an account of my decade-long battle with the issue of child sexual abuse in the ultra-orthodox Jewish community and the significant lack of female representation in this field.

Specifically, I am concerned with the missing voices of both female victims and advocates, two groups of women who should be at the forefront of the fight against child sexual abuse, yet were nowhere to be found during the time of the Royal Commission Hearing in 2015.

I aim to explore possible reasons for this absence, as well as the fraught way in which those females who do participate respond to their community's needs.

The Beginning

As a young woman in the 1970s and 1980s, I used to buy my chickens from Hofstadter's. Hofstadter's was a place almost as mythical as it was real. Packed with Jewish people of every sect, in Hofstadter's it was ordinary to witness the voluminous wigs of the ultra-orthodox women, tightly bound headscarves of the old European ladies, the crocheted *kippot* of the religious Zionists, the mink and fox *shtreimelach* of the Satmarer and Belzer Hasidim, the jeans worn by the newer generation of modern Westernised Jews, and of course children, running, jumping, scurrying and scampering.

You would imagine that Hofstaedter's could exist in some place like New York, somewhere like the Upper East Side or Brooklyn. Or perhaps Hofstaedter's was something that could only truly have existed in Poland itself, transplanted from the vanished world of Europe to the New World of Carlisle Street, Australia.

I especially loved the conversations between the ultra-orthodox Jews overheard at Hofstaedter's. Friends would always be ringing, a daughter would be going overseas for a wedding, and a son was having his *bar mitzvah*. There was always something happening, something going on. There was an air of excitement for the weekly *Shabbat* and before a *yomtov* (holiday).

To me, as an outsider, this seemed like the Garden of Eden replanted. People supported each other; families lived together and worked together. To my less religious, culturally diluted gaze, it seemed everyone was always included and taken care of.

It seemed to me that the ultra-orthodox community was an island of purity in the sea of modernity. Everything seemed so innocent behind the glass shopfront of this iconic Melbourne establishment.

Over the decades, my encounters with the ultra-orthodox community of Melbourne continued. One Jewish New Year, I decided to go to the synagogue service at the local Jewish nursing home. The service was conducted by a Chabad rabbi and with the support of Chabad members; Chabad is an ultra-orthodox sect of Judaism and one of its largest communities. It was a beautiful service – in a different sort of way.

There were very frail residents there, one who was brought to the service in a bed. What was so meaningful was that these elderly people, at a difficult stage of life, had an opportunity to attend the Rosh Hashanah service. To hear the familiar tunes, pray, reflect or just be in company. I watched while a resident was helped to put on his *tallit* (prayer shawl). Both men seemed very comfortable with each other. The care and respect for the elderly man was heart-warming; the service was beautiful as was the short sermon.

Chabad's work with the elderly is one of many examples that have led the Jewish community at large to hold this ultra-orthodox sect in high esteem, to trust it. My impression of Chabad as I was growing up was based on my observation of the visible good it did for those in need.

In 1997, I found myself once again amid the cosy conversations of ultra-orthodox women – this time, in the women's section of a synagogue. I was instantly transported back to the days of Hofstadter's as I silently immersed myself in the familiarity of this warm community that I had been admiring from afar.

On this night, however, I wasn't to leave with the same warm feeling that I received from Hofstadter's. In fact, I was exposed to a very different side of a community I had mythologised for decades. We had come to hear a talk by American Rabbi and psychiatrist Abraham Twerski, an author whose ground-breaking book on spousal abuse addressed the silence surrounding domestic violence in the Jewish community.¹

Broadly, Twerski sought to challenge long-held misconceptions that led victims of such violence to remain in their marriages; he also confronted the reality that child sexual abuse occurs in Jewish communities, though on this night it was not discussed.

The event was organised by a then new organisation, The Jewish Taskforce Against Domestic Violence. I admired this group, viewing them as courageous orthodox women, united to change entrenched patterns of violence occurring in Jewish families.

The group's stated mission, as listed on their website, was "to confront the reality of family violence and sexual assault and its long-term repercussion on families." In 2005, the Taskforce would go on to add child sexual abuse to its mission brief. It was in this area of the Taskforce's work that I became particularly interested, through my profession as a social worker, and more specifically, the cases that kept coming before me.

The Journey

In the early 2000s, through my job as a social worker, I came across a pattern, a persistent issue that accompanied clients who had initially arrived with other, seemingly unrelated, stories. The unexpected problem, the crucial pattern that underpinned so many of my clients' stories, was child sexual abuse.

I didn't begin my social work career with an interest in child sexual abuse. Like many other people of my generation, I was only vaguely aware that the problem even existed. As the magnitude of this problem – in terms of prevalence as well as negative impacts – began to dawn on me, I became increasingly eager to make a change.

Mrs G

The first client who talked to me about child sexual abuse was Mrs G, whom I met when I was working in a Jewish aged-care service. Mrs G started to share her life story with me, a story that started like so many stories I had heard. She was born in a remote, tiny village deep in the Polish countryside.

My client, like many other Jewish people across Eastern Europe at that time, had been born into abject poverty. Mrs G's father had died when she was very young and her mother remarried. As a young girl, Mrs G was put to work to manage the household and do the chores. Then came the Holocaust. Mrs G's survival was a miracle. The unimaginable horrors she had experienced, the loss of family and the trauma she had endured defied belief.

I thought I understood Mrs G because my parents were Holocaust survivors and many of my clients had lived through the Holocaust as well. It turns out I did not understand her at all.

After the Holocaust, Mrs G married and migrated to Australia. She worked alongside her husband in their small business until his sudden death. Mrs G had a degenerative eye disease. By the time we met, she had lost the last of her vision. This tiny, frail woman in her eighties could no longer read or go on the long walks she used to. Reading had been one of her great escapes and now this too had been snatched away from her.

On one occasion Mrs G began our meeting with this statement: "I've had a very hard life." As she continued to speak, I thought she would talk about the Holocaust but I was wrong. She wanted to talk about her life as a small child in Poland, living with her stepfather. Her abuse started over seventy years earlier and yet Mrs G had not told a single person about it, ever. I was the first person she had shared with.

Mrs G spoke about her stepfather, and although she did not name what happened to her as physical and sexual assault, I came to understand that her stepfather was a violent man who did what he wanted to her. She did not use the words like "hit" or "sexual", I did, and she confirmed with her body language, nodding her head in agreement. Mrs G and I came to a new understanding of why her life was so hard before the Holocaust.

For the first time in her life, Mrs G could not do the things that had distracted her from thinking about the past. While she was busy, her experiences remained buried, but when her diversions were taken from her, Mrs G had to confront the abuse she had experienced as a child. In the quiet emptiness of her world without her husband and her eyesight, Mrs G's painful feelings started to surface.

She had been able to speak about the Holocaust because – bizarrely – it was more socially acceptable to discuss the Holocaust than child sexual abuse. Mrs G was pivotal in showing me that the trauma of child sexual abuse remains engraved on the very being of the victim. She also opened my eyes to the silence, societal shame and taboo surrounding child sexual abuse.

The Beth Rivkah Girl

The next case occurred while I was working at the same Jewish community service organisation, on the newly created Intake And Assessment Team. This case was a referral pertaining to a schoolgirl from Beth Rivkah Ladies' College. Beth Rivkah is an Orthodox Jewish girls' school attended by the daughters of Melbourne's Chabad/Lubavitch community.

The client was a fifteen-year-old girl who had been sexually abused over several years by a relative. The referring doctor explained that the girl couldn't go on any longer, but that she knew there would be repercussions if she told anyone.

Eventually, the girl told a teacher she thought she could trust. The teacher's response was to reprimand the girl for sharing such information, telling her that she was not a "pure diamond." *Pure diamond* is a very specific cultural term and a way of dividing those born into an already-religious family from those whose parents have chosen to become religious and make the transition through learning.

In response to the appalling treatment of this girl, I did two things. First, I told the rabbi of the Jewish care facility about the case. I explained that the teacher was mandated to report abuse. I told him that the newly formed generic Intake And Assessment Team was not sufficiently skilled to deal with child sexual abuse.

The rabbi did not appear to take any action. So I arranged for the Intake and Assessment Team to receive specialised training in child protection.

The next thing that I did was resign.

Of course, back then I did not know that I would be talking to the same rabbi intermittently over the next ten years, in his various rabbinical roles – and receiving the same shut-down response over and over again.

The heartless act of the teacher turning her back on a child desperate for help horrified me. The rejection this girl suffered seemed like emotional abuse on top of the sexual abuse. Moreover, I began to wonder why the girl's mother had not intervened to protect her. Did she know? If not, why not? The abuse had gone for years. Did any of the school staff, who were all female, suspect what was going on? Did they wilfully ignore it?

Many years later, during the 2015 Royal Commission hearings, I would listen to the testimony of an abuse survivor who explained that in the Chabad community, you are put into a hierarchy or pedigree. This hierarchy was the very same one that governed the Beth Rivkah girl and her teacher's unfathomable response. You were either in the prestigious *pure diamond* category of Lubavitch; recently Lubavitch; a returnee to Judaism; or, you were a *moser* – someone who betrays the community by informing on one of its members.²

This hierarchy would provide a central piece of the puzzle to the passivity and silence of the women in the ultra-orthodox Jewish community and its particular response to child sexual abuse.

The Three Sisters

Subsequently, I was presented with a case involving three sisters. It was this case that cemented my resolve to improve the way in which community members and professionals working with children dealt with child sexual abuse. The girls, aged seven, ten and twelve, were being abused by the same person: their stepfather.

One of the sisters told her teacher, and the school called in the police. It was my job to support the sisters through the process of their police interviews, which were taped and would be used as evidence in the event of prosecution.

I listened to each of the sisters in turn.

Aside from the horrific details of the girls' testimonies, there was an eeriness to their accounts. I could not pinpoint what I was feeling at the time, but would often be left numb after listening to them. It wasn't so much the facts, but something in the way the sisters talked about *themselves* in describing the assaults.

The three tween-age girls testified that they would be asleep when the assaults took place. Their stepfather would come in and carry one of them, asleep, out of bed and into another room. As they described it, their body was like a tree, a log, a toy or a doll.

Every one of the sisters described that in the moment of the abuse, there was a resignation, a defeated acceptance that “well, this was just going to happen anyway.” He would then carry them back to their bed.

Eventually, it occurred to me that the girls were speaking about themselves as objects, objects that had no control over their body. These children were talking in the first person, but I was observing a stark example of disassociating. This was the eeriness I was perceiving: the girls’ separation from their own humanity.

Watching the girls give their videotaped testimony was my first insight into what it sounds like when people lose power over their own bodies and accept that they have lost that power. The sisters had to accept that in their supposedly safe environment, this was going to happen to them. They couldn’t kick and scream, and the next day they were going to have to get dressed and face their world, go to school and integrate the abuse into their daily lives. And once again, the question arose: how did the mother in this situation allow this to happen?

The Prison of Silence

In 2011, a watershed event occurred. Former Yeshivah student Manny Waks, the son of ultra-orthodox Melbourne parents, made a public statement revealing his sexual abuse at the hands of Yeshivah staff members in the mid-1980s. The first incidence of abuse happened when he was approximately eleven years old. ³

The revelations led to swift and fundamental changes across the landscape of child sexual abuse in the Australian Jewish community: police investigations, arrests and convictions, and more victims coming forward. The public was also able to witness Manny’s public testimony before the Victorian Parliamentary Inquiry into the Handling of Child Abuse by Religious and Other Organisations.⁴

In 2012, Manny established *Tzedek*, a support and advocacy group for Jewish victims of child sexual abuse.⁵

As story after story appeared in the media about child sexual abuse at Yeshivah College, as account after account appeared about the cover-up of these crimes by community leaders, the truth was slowly and painfully revealed.

Astonishingly, the female-run Jewish Taskforce was minimising the rabbis’ responsibility and culpability. With each shocking headline, the Taskforce assured us that times had changed, that non-reporting to authorities was a problem of the

past. On 1 July 2011, in a letter to the editor of the *Australian Jewish News*, the Chair of the Taskforce told us that “while it it’s true to say that there was a code of silence surrounding such matters, it is also true to say that this all-pervasive attitude is now changing. It is easy to sensationalise such matters.”⁶

This explosive climate showed a worrying lack of public discourse and literature on how ultra-orthodox rabbis deal with victims who come to them seeking help from abuse – both in the context of domestic violence and child sexual abuse.

One article that caught my attention pertained to Israel. Written by Ben Sales, (2013) it was entitled “In Israel’s Haredi Community: Breaking a Culture of Secrecy on Domestic Violence.” At this time, it became pivotal to my understanding of this issue and the position of rabbis within the ultra-orthodox world.

The article refers to the case of an ultra-orthodox Israeli woman who was the victim of ongoing violence perpetrated by her husband. The woman, who preferred to remain anonymous, sought the advice of a rabbi for nine years about the actions of her violent husband.⁷

The rabbi told her not to speak up about her husband’s verbal, physical and sexual attacks. He assured her that the abuse would pass, that if she obeyed his every wish – folding his napkin just so or letting him do as he liked in bed – that the attacks would end and he would stop telling their grown sons that she was a bad mother. But when her sons began to threaten her as well, the woman knew it was time to leave.

Why would a woman heed advice for so long that was clearly not working? It was becoming clear that the authority of the rabbi and the passivity of the women – both as victims of abuse and its combatants – were linked. To understand the actions of the women, or indeed their lack, one needed to look closely at the role of the rabbi.

The Role of the Rabbi

The word rabbi derives from the Hebrew word *rabi* which means “my master.” Jewish law (*Halakhah*) governs every aspect of religious life, as well as daily life, from how to dress and what to eat, to when women are permitted to have sex with their husbands. The power of the rabbi is reflected in his role as guide and advice-giver over such matters. When in doubt over any law, it is customary to ask the rabbi, no matter how personal.

The rabbi’s governance over his community is especially evident in Family Purity Laws. The law of *Nidda* refers to a woman who is “ritually impure” and applies to women throughout menstruation. For seven days after, after this period of “impurity,” the woman is expected to conduct a self-checking process with a cloth,

in order to ensure that the bleeding has completely stopped. If at any point the woman is unsure of her cloth test results, she is to send a swab to her rabbi for examination.

This law, whereby the rabbi has the final word on a woman's purity and suitability for her husband, is reflective of the orthodox belief in the rabbi as central to the decisions of the individual. The example of *Nidda* shows the extent to which religious regulation overrides personal choice.

However, the most powerful cultural practice used by rabbis in compelling an individual to act a particular way is the Jewish community's system of arranged marriages. In the context of sexual abuse, the rabbi can advise the victim not to disclose their experience because no future spouse would want a partner stigmatized as "damaged goods." In addition, no family would want their child to marry a *moser* – the aforementioned "informant" and the lowest rung on the community ladder.

Rabbi Moshe Soloveichik spoke angrily at Chicago's Nefesh forum (2010) about the way in which arranged marriages were being used as a threat, perceived or implied, to manage the behaviour of individuals in the orthodox community: "if you don't tow the line of the community, your children's *shidduchs* will be impacted, even years later. This hallucinatory weapon of social pressure is used by many in our communities in the United States."⁸

He gave the example of a boy who had been abused by a teacher. Years later, his mother came to see Rabbi Soloveichik to seek help for her son, who had become angry and difficult to deal with as a result of the abuse. She told Rabbi Soloveichik that at the time of the disclosure, she met with a group of rabbis who acknowledged her right to go the police, but would not recommend that she do so. The reason given was that the woman had daughters who would need *shidduchs* in the future.

At a Jewish Community Council of Victoria (JCCV) educational forum (August, 2011), a leader of The Jewish Taskforce was the keynote speaker. She spoke about specific cultural issues that contribute to the problem of not reporting abuse in the orthodox Jewish community. She noted that when a *shidduch* is being arranged, the first question asked is "Is it a nice family?"

In this paradigm, sexual assault does not a nice family make. She posed the following question: "If your brother had a choice between two girls – both lovely girls, but one had been raped six months ago, who would you choose? Even if the girl who was raped was getting help and good support, which one would you choose?"⁹

It was becoming clear that the silence and passivity of the women was greatly shaped by the unassailable power of the rabbi and what he stands for. From the victims, to their female family members, to those like the Taskforce members who

were charged with an official advocacy role, women across the community were trapped in the edifice of silence, jointly holding up the lofty scaffolding of social expectation, cohesion and conformity.

The dubious nature of some rabbinical advice, namely its inclination towards silence, was highlighted in 2015 by Israeli journalist Ariela Sternbach, who went undercover as a “victim” of sexual abuse. As part of her investigation, she approached twenty-seven different rabbis and community leaders. None of the rabbis knew that the situation they were dealing with was fictitious or that the “victim” was a journalist.

In only a few of the cases did they suggest reporting to the police.¹⁰

One of the rabbis featured in the article, Rabbi Ratzon Arussi, is the Chief Rabbi of the town of Kiryat Ono. He has a doctorate in law and teaches on the Jewish legal system at Bar Ilan University. He heads a *beit din*, or religious court, for resolving monetary disputes. Below is a transcript of the conversation between the reporter, Ariela Sternbach, and Rabbi Arussi. She is purporting to be a seventeen-year-old victim of sexual abuse.

Sternbach: My friend's father touched me, really touched me. I wanted to file a complaint, but my mother says it's not worth it, that it will interfere with shidduchim and such, the question is, what does the rabbi say?

Rabbi Arussi: What do you mean by touching, if I may ask?

S: He undressed and touched me in private places.

RA: Okay, but he did not, God forbid, get to the act?

S: No.

RA: I mean, he didn't touch in an intimate place, and . . .

S: Yes, he did touch. He did touch me under the skirt, and such.

RA: But he didn't touch with something intimate of his to something intimate of yours?

S: Yes, with his organ.

RA: Yes?

S: Yes.

RA: So he did touch in that place with his intimate organ.

S: Yes.

RA: Did you have contact with him before?

S: No, I went there, to my friend.

RA: How did it deteriorate to that situation? Did he know you before? What?

S: I've been there before, and [my friend] has visited me. We would go into the room.

RA: Ah, the father of a friend. You visited her as a friend.

A: Yes.

RA: That's how you know him, and he knows you. So he's also haredi [an ultra-orthodox stream of Judaism].

S: Yes.

RA: So he took advantage of an opportunity when his daughter was not present?

S: My friend went to the makolet, and he came into the room and closed the door.

RA: Did you object or anything?

S: Yes, yes, I told him that she would come back soon, and that it wasn't pleasant. [Hebrew: Lo na'im. This is how children are taught to respond to behaviour that they don't like.]

RA: Listen, unfortunately, your mother is right, even though in this case a complaint should be filed against him, because this went beyond any *stam* [touching]. In fact, in effect, he committed an act. Can you hear me?

S: Yes.

RA: He committed an act upon you. That is why I asked you these questions, and that is a serious thing. I hope, and I'm not, God forbid, asking out of curiosity, I hope he did not insert his organ, correct?

S: Yes. No, he didn't.

RA: So you remained a virgin.

S: Yes.

RA: I understand. So there is no question at all of entering.

S: Why?... No.

RA: Because if now you are not a virgin, then what he did would bother you. But, if you remained a virgin, and if it is not the level of forcing, then your mother is right, but you must break off all contact with that house.

S: That's clear, I don't go there anymore.

RA: When did this happen?

S: A month ago.

RA: A month? And when did you tell your mother?

S: Immediately.

RA: How much does it bother you that this happened a month ago and you are only asking me now?

S: I don't know, I'm okay, I'm managing, the question is . . .

RA: Your friend? Does your friend know?

S: I haven't told her anything. It's very unpleasant between us. But all of a sudden it occurred to me, maybe he is doing it to her too? To other friends?

RA: Yes, that's true. That's true. And that's a reason to complain, but your life comes before that of others. Because in the haredi world, this can harm you. In a few different realms. If it stayed on that level, and you stayed a virgin, and there was no forcing, stay away, change yourself, the fact that he succeeded in tempting you on one level . . . you must gather emotional and spiritual strength, to change completely.

S: This wasn't wanted on my part, I tried to move away from him.

RA: I understand. But he is haredi and you are haredi. Right?

S: Yes, he is a Yeshivah student.

RA: He's a student. He suddenly comes and does something very rare and very, very serious in the haredi world. This needs to shock you, you were warmed up. On one level he succeeded in tempting you. It's not a simple thing.

S: But I didn't want it. It's not that I wanted it.

RA: I understand. Okay. Strengthen yourself spiritually, very much, don't file a complaint with the police, and, how old are you today?

S: *Seventeen.*

RA: *Get away, get out of that environment, and find a good shidduch, as soon as possible.*

Case studies such as this disclose the chilling ease with which some ultra-orthodox rabbis blame the victim, directing responsibility for the abuse – and its resolution – onto them. These girls know the immense humiliation that comes from having their truth denied. Moreover, they know that their future exists under the dark cloud of responsibility for the *shidduch*. What is being reinforced with every rabbinical response such as the one above is this: their truth, their very experience of their bodies, is a burden and a risk to their families and to their tribe.

In addition, there is an extra layer of pressure on female victims in the ultra-orthodox paradigm: their very gender is a threat to their safety; unless they are physically and behaviourally restricted via modesty laws, their sexuality, their *femaleness*, is bait for sexual abuse. This ultra-orthodox vocabulary about girls' and women's bodies, about modesty, virginity and purity, is one that teaches girls that their bodies belong to their family and to the collective community.

The Royal Commission into Institutional Responses to Child Abuse in Australia – Case Study 22

It was a mixed bunch that stood outside the County Court of Victoria in February 2015, waiting for the Royal Commission's public hearing to begin. The hearing was to examine the responses of Yeshivah Melbourne and Yeshiva Bondi to allegations of child sexual abuse, going back to the mid-1980s.

In 2012, the then Australian Prime Minister, Julia Gillard, announced a nationwide Royal Commission into the sexual abuse of children in institutions, to investigate the way in which institutions have responded to child sexual abuse allegations. "There have been too many revelations of adults who have averted their eyes from this evil," Gillard said. "I believe we must do everything we can to make sure that what has happened in the past is never allowed to happen again."¹¹

Private sessions then took place around the country, giving people who were abused in institutions an opportunity to tell of their experiences. Based on these testimonies, the commission selected institutions that would be examined through public hearings. It was no honour to be selected for a hearing.

Senior rabbinical leaders were called to give evidence about alleged cover-ups of historic sexual abuse against children. It was the first time that orthodox Judaism had been exposed to such scrutiny. All of a sudden, men who lived their life according to values of piety found themselves facing a new kind of judgement

in a completely new realm. I wondered how many of the people involved in the case had been inside the County Court before.

There were many men who looked out of place, in their black suits and long beards, carrying food in plastic bags. This was kosher food, prepared at home to sustain the person for the day, as food could not be purchased near the County Court unless it was strictly kosher. There were victims of child sexual abuse who would testify under oath. There were family members, who would testify under oath, or those who came just to be there for their loved ones. There were parents, looking anxious and concerned.

One man was carrying food for his younger relative. You could see he would do anything to help and in any way, although in some crucial ways, it was too late – he could not protect him from the abuse. Moreover, he could not protect his family from the community that was now, bizarrely, shunning him for telling his story.

It was surreal to see victims and the leadership that had failed them sharing the same space. And perhaps most surreal of all was the image of these rabbis who had claimed of themselves ecclesiastical infallibility and implied a connection to the divine, soon to be sitting like naughty schoolchildren, being admonished and chastised by a judge vested with a secular power.

The hearing would go on to confirm several troubling facts: that allegations of abuse at the Yeshivah College and Yeshivah Centre were not reported to the police. Perpetrators abused more victims as they continued to have access to children. The commission spent a lot of time examining the unsatisfactory response of Yeshivah leaders to disclosures as well as examining how victims were punished for reporting to the police. Each victim said the same thing: his (for all those who testified were male) motivation was to stop the code of silence that enabled abuse to occur and continue.

The commission heard the testimony of David (a pseudonym), a survivor of child sexual abuse perpetrated against him from the approximate age of eleven at Yeshivah College and holiday programs in Sydney:

I am not here to focus on the pain and trauma of the sexual assaults perpetrated against me as a child. Rather, I am here to shed light on the current institutional response to child sexual abuse within the Jewish community. There remains a culture of cover-up and denial. I have experienced bullying, intimidation and ostracisation. I believe this is as a result of me speaking out about matters of child sexual abuse. ¹²

David was silent throughout his youth and held his experiences to himself into adulthood. However, in 2011, upon hearing another story of child abuse at Yeshivah College, and the fear of the victim to report it, David decided to report his abuse to the police. Unfortunately, David's decision to report his abuse resulted in terrible repercussions for both him and his family. Where they would be forced to

pay the price most heavily would be within their own community – the very community that was meant to protect David as a child, and to support his wife and children in the fallout of the revelations.

David's decision to report and co-operate with police was seen as going against an ancient Jewish law of *mesirah*, which forbids a Jew from informing on fellow Jews. *Mesirah* literally means "To turn over" – to turn over a Jewish person to secular authorities. The person who commits *mesirah* is called a *moser*, a term that, as has already been mentioned, puts an individual at the very bottom of the ultra-orthodox social hierarchy. ¹³

The concept of *mesirah* – created out of a need to protect the persecuted Jewish community from being further destroyed – dates back centuries to when Jews who were handed over to the authorities could be killed; *mesirah* provided a safety net around Jews who might inadvertently deliver a member of their own community to this horrific outcome.

On the surface, it appeared that rabbis had accepted that *mesirah* did not apply to the criminal act of sexually abusing children; rabbinic statements were decreed in 2010, and again in 2013, stating that *mesirah* did not apply. Yet, successive presidents of rabbinic councils, who were also members of the Chabad community, not only remained silent in relation to the shunning of victims and their families, some were active participants in the alienation of the victims. David's testimony confirmed that the very rabbis who issued these statements failed to support victims through their actions:

I am here because this all needs to change if we are to create an environment where children are protected, and victims and their families will not hesitate in reporting child sexual abuse for fear of the consequences of doing so. ¹⁴

The Power of Shunning and Ostracising

To ostracise means to exclude someone from a group or from society. Psychologist Kipling William in his book *Ostracism: The Power of Silence*, holds that ostracising and shunning of a person who was once a member of the group are acts of control and aggression, with powerful consequences. Being ostracised is extremely painful and can have devastating results on one's wellbeing, including loss of self-esteem, depression and anger. ¹⁵

Dr Brené Brown is a research professor at the University of Houston, Graduate College of Social Work. She studies vulnerability, courage, worthiness and shame. In her well-known Ted Talk on the power of vulnerability (2010), she discusses the need to belong. According to Brown, love and belonging are basic needs of all men, women and children. We are built with an innate, unavoidable urge to connect with others, be loved by others, and belong. Wherever there are issues of feeling disconnected, there is great suffering. ¹⁶

At the Royal Commission hearing, we heard about the impacts of being shunned from those who had experienced it. Upon giving evidence at the hearing, David's call for an apology reflected the pain felt by those victims who were ostracised: "Bring my soul back by treating me like a person, by acknowledging what happened to me was wrong".¹⁷

This pain is similarly reflected in the words of Manny Waks, who talks publicly about his abuse and the social impact of being a whistle blower. Generally, Manny's public persona is stoic and calm. However, in a 2015 ABC documentary (*Breaking the Silence*) he breaks down at the memory of being bullied. "I felt like many people including adults and teachers at the school and centre knew about what happened to me and tolerated me being bullied. I felt this because no-one intervened or helped me" (*Breaking the Silence*, ABC documentary, 2015).¹⁸

In the same documentary, Manny's father, Zephaniah Waks, tears up as he speaks about the pain of this mistreatment. "We felt our world was flipped upside down. Every aspect of our lives involved the Yeshivah community. It felt like suddenly we were reduced to nothing and had lost all our friends. This caused emotional pain and trauma."

Many families who have been shunned physically leave the communities they grew up in. Manny Waks left Melbourne and eventually settled in Israel. His parents moved overseas before him, leaving behind the community that had been central to their lives.

In orthodox communities all over the world, the shunning of victims and their families goes on in an identical fashion. The names may be different, but the way of dealing with those who are abused, who do not remain silent, is the same.

In London, Yehudis Goldsobel was abused by Menachem Mendel Levy, a member of a prominent Chabad family and a trusted friend of the family. She was fourteen, he was twenty-seven when it began. Yehudis finally went to rabbis for help. In an interview with Anna Sheinman, for the *Jewish Chronicle* (July 18, 2013), Yehudis described her experience: "I was in despair. I was a little lost sheep knocking on doors. Your whole life you are told if you are ever in trouble you turn to the rabbis and here they were turning away from me".¹⁹

Yehudis finally went to police to report years of sexual abuse. Levy was convicted and sentenced to three years in prison. Despite his conviction, community support for Levy did not waver; Yehudis and her family and friends were demonised, harassed and shunned. "Since the sentencing, the reaction from the community has been really upsetting. I've had people closing doors, I've had people stop talking to me."

It appears that the tragic pattern, repeated globally in ultra-orthodox communities, is that the perpetrators may be convicted and serving time in jail, but the victims and their families are being punished too.

Which begs the persistent question: *Why aren't the women, those who are scripturally and practically endowed with the task of nurturing and maintaining domestic wellness, speaking up for themselves, their children and for each other?*

Where Are the Women?

At the Royal Commission hearing in February 2015, the absence of women was as disturbing as any of the testimonies that were about to be revealed. Rabbis were not accompanied by their wives, nor were any of the victims who testified female. The Jewish Taskforce members were not there to support victims who were witnesses.

The testimony of one woman, whom we shall call Miriam, showed the power of restoring a female voice to the story. Miriam is the wife of David (whose testimony we explored earlier). She spoke of how the community's response to child sexual abuse allegations was defined by a "type of moral destitution," where in an effort to preserve one's standing in the community, the concept of *yichus* (pedigree) was given preference to the suffering of the so-called "informant" and his family. This sort of division, this hierarchical mentality, echoed the "rough diamond" description I had encountered all those years ago.²⁰

The absence of female support became even more apparent as Miriam spoke of the hostility shown towards her children:

The night before my daughter's Bat Mitzvah party, my daughter was very distressed and told me that everyone hates us and that she was nervous that no one would come to her Bat Mitzvah party.

Miriam also talked of a man who they considered an extension of their family slamming his hand down on the prayer lectern at the synagogue to prevent her son from sitting next to him. She describes "smart quips" and "vicious accusations" shouted in synagogue in front of her children.

According to the Torah, a woman is endowed with a higher level of *binah* (understanding, intuition and intelligence). Her role as mother and protector of the household is attributed a high degree of importance and the spiritual influence she exercises is given great respect. What happens when women of such high spiritual value fail to stand up for the very children they are supposed to be guiding and influencing? What happens when the female silence allows fellow females to feel destitute and alone? I wondered what complex blend of rules and expectations stopped the women in Miriam's community from coming forward and openly showing their support.

The women in the community could not possibly have been oblivious to such acts of social ostracising. Indeed, it seemed that as the leadership knowingly turned the victim into the suspect, a ripple effect occurred throughout the entire community,

making friends and fellow worshippers collectively responsible for ousting this family. The responsibility of one being towards another gave way to the perceived greater “good” of the community. In Miriam’s words:

My husband reported a conversation between himself and a member of the Yeshivah shule [synagogue] committee, who told my husband that he didn't have any personal issues with him, but to remember that he wore two hats in the community and that associating with my family had ruined other friendships, his wife's professional relationships and didn't look good for his family. Indeed, we should have been more sensitive; he had children to marry off.

As I sat in the County Court, I tried to imagine the women in Miriam’s life. Her friends, neighbours, female colleagues, fellow school mothers and acquaintances – who were they in all this? The women in the community seemed not only oblivious to such acts of social ostracising, but actively causing them to happen. I looked around the courtroom. A woman sitting near me, a Catholic woman who attended the hearing to support victims of abuse, wept openly, but I didn’t see any Orthodox Jewish women. I felt compelled to keep investigating the roots of this sad reality.

Complicity

Silence unfortunately paves the way for a more worrying issue – complicity. In Melbourne, this complicity is, ironically, most strongly embodied in the actions of the female-run Jewish Taskforce, the same organisation that I admired so deeply in the 1990s.

Debbie Wiener is the Chair the Jewish Taskforce and has acted as its spokesperson. Wiener has assured the public of a growing shift in the community leadership’s response to child abuse at this time of crisis. In a letter to the Australian Jewish News in July 2011, Wiener emphasised that “Yeshivah College is cooperating fully with police in its current investigation.”²¹

However, the Royal Commission revealed that this is patently untrue. For instance, Yeshivah was asked by the police for details of all students enrolled at Yeshivah between 1989 and 1993, not just those taught by the then alleged abuser, David Kramer. It was discovered that the real name of “David” (the Royal Commission witness) was omitted from the list of students.

Astonishingly, the Taskforce remained the only voice and sole advisor to the community. In 2006, it took steps to be the one and only Jewish organisation responding to child sexual abuse, when it asked a secular group of women, The National Council of Jewish Women (NCJW), to withdraw support for a community awareness and education campaign. The reason given by the Taskforce

representative to the president of the NCJW was the desire to present a “unified and sensitive” approach to the community. ²²

Such an approach to child sexual abuse is apparently similar in Jewish communities around the world. I discovered this at the First International Congress for Child Protection Organizations in Jewish Communities, held in Israel in 2014. Here, in a discussion with my fellow conference participants from Australia and around the world, I was alerted to similar irregularities I had observed in relation to the “reform” that was being delivered in Melbourne’s JeAwish community.

Psychologist Dr Michael Salamon, a participant of the congress who has worked with Jewish communities in the New York area for more than two decades, articulated some of these irregularities, in an article published in the online *Times of Israel*:

What is going on behind closed doors in some of the Jewish organizations that assert to protect children: Certain participants at the Conference represent organizations that operate within their own guidelines. Some work within organizations that view their mandate as governed by the needs of the organization over the people they service. Some openly support the notion that they must first clear all cases through a rabbi before reporting. Some believe it best never to report child abusers, but privately treat them psychologically and medically. Information that is being presented to front line professionals is often altered, watered down, or even withheld because of mistaken notions of what certain communities see as their own unique cultural needs. ²³

The community’s “cultural needs” referred to by Dr Salamon at the 2014 conference were mirrored at the Royal Commission Hearing in February 2015. These included the notion that child sexual abuse is a behavior that can be “cured” by rabbinic discipline and repentance; and, of course, the pervasive power of the *shidduch* as a force in stopping victims coming forward. ²⁴

Faulty Foundations: Placing the Burden on the Child

In the last decade, as some (but not all) ultra-orthodox community members have begun to accept that rabbis cannot stop an abuser of children by discipline and cure, they have sought other solutions. According to Debbie Wiener, “One has to find the tools to help prevent children from being abused when they are confronted with a dangerous situation (*Australian Jewish News*, “Tackling Abuse Head On”, September 2011). “One has to try to remove the opportunity for abuse,” Wiener has written. ²⁵

Indeed, the removal of such opportunity is a fine theoretical concept, but what exactly are the “tools” that Wiener refers to? Sadly, this latest generation of Chabad prevention methodology targets children, instead of the offender. It is based on the following foundations:

- The presumption (*umdenah*) under Jewish law that those who commit child sexual abuse suffer from a sickness, albeit one that cannot simply be cured by repentance or by rabbinic intervention.²⁶
- The belief that teaching children about personal safety will prevent abuse. Weiner states: "Giving a child the tools to say 'No' denies the perpetrator the opportunity to abuse".²⁷
- The reliance on evidence that has neither been widely tested nor been peer reviewed. According to Weiner "We have empirical evidence of the effectiveness of such a tool, and in fact were apprised recently of a situation at a school that has implemented this program where a child effectively used that strategy."²⁸

The first presumption is factually incorrect. It is a misconception that all sex offenders are pathological pedophiles and therefore classified as having a sickness.²⁹

Individuals who are exclusively sexually attracted to prepubescent children are termed pedophiles and pedophilia is considered to be a disorder that is included in the *Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders (DSM-5)*.³⁰

However, these make up a relatively small percentage of offenders. Indeed, not all offenders are sexually attracted to young children exclusively. In addition, not all those who are classified as paedophiles will act on their attraction to children.

Labelling all abusers as having a sickness is dangerous. It takes the responsibility for abuse away from the perpetrator and denies the fact that while feeling the attraction may be involuntary, *going through with the act* is a choice. In fact, opportunity can play a key role in the commission of sexual offences against children. According to Wortley and Smallbone (2006), situational and environmental factors can play a key role in sexual offending against children.³¹

The second presumption, of placing the burden of prevention on children, belies the assumption that children can protect themselves when they are taught to identify sexual behaviour, to say no, and to seek help. Dangerously, this framework assumes that all children have the developmental ability to recognise grooming and inappropriate actions, and the power to say no to a would-be abuser, despite the power imbalance and cognitive difference between perpetrator and victim. This also has the horrific consequence of shaming the victim for being unable to protect him/herself, placing the responsibility for the abuse with the child.

It is helpful to view an example of how this methodology is delivered.

In a YouTube video, Rabbi Yakov Horowitz for Project Yes states: "I am Yaakov Horowitz the Director of Project Yes. This is a public service of Project Yes, designed to create awareness and to empower you, train you how to speak to your children about abuse prevention. How to speak to them about personal safety and to

discuss research-based, proven techniques that are very simple, appropriate and very *tiersnick* [wholesome]." Several times in the video, Rabbi Horowitz repeats that this methodology is research-based, that it "really works".³²

The Report of the Protecting Victoria's Vulnerable Children Inquiry (tabled by the Minister for Community Services in Parliament on 28 February 2012), weighed up the wealth of international research and evidence about the effectiveness of teaching children personal safety to prevent abuse. It concluded that there is, in fact, "little convincing evidence for the effectiveness of these programs for preventing sexual abuse" (Finklehor 2009).³³

In 2014, I wrote to Rabbi Horowitz and voiced my concerns, stating, "Many people believe that if they talk to their children about child sexual abuse, they will be protected. We know this is not factual. I ask you Rabbi Yaakov to clarify the misconception in the way that reaches the many people who believe that children can protect themselves. You have much influence in child protection. Your advice reaches orthodox communities worldwide. Your video, although well intended, is sending a wrong message. It is very important that you correct this."³⁴

His answer was that the video "... was never intended to solve every facet of the wide ranging efforts needed to protect children – only to train them in the basics of child safety." However, this was precisely my concern. A methodology that places the burden of prevention on the child does not protect the child. Moreover, it excludes what does protect the child, namely adults taking responsibility for the safety of children.³⁵

Struggling to make an impact on the Chabad-dominated communal organisations, I made a submission to the Parliamentary Inquiry that was accepted by the committee. The Inquiry report stated:

Ms Refosky's key concern was that the approach of the Jewish Community Council of Victoria and the Jewish Taskforce against Family Violence and Sexual Assault has a primary focus on teaching children personal safety to prevent abuse. She expressed the view that: The Taskforce's emphasis has been on educating Rabbis and telling children to say NO, but parents in the Jewish community are not being provided with very important information they need to protect their children from being abused.

*They are not being informed about the need for institutional child protection policies, codes of conduct etc. and how to assess whether policies are good. Importantly, the Committee determined that any prevention strategies that focus on children or victims should not do so in isolation from a broader preventive approach targeting organizations and the broader community.*³⁶

The Committee went on:

Children should never be responsible for protecting themselves from the harm of criminal child abuse, and prevention approaches that target children should be focused on initiatives that build their awareness.

The solution begins with leaders telling their communities – including its women – all the facts, accurately. Rather than expecting children to ward off their abusers, the community needs to be empowered and encouraged by rabbis to act to save a child. Specifically, leaders must assure communities that they will not be shunned if they report abuse and community education must detail how to react to and report abuse. Rabbis must assure individuals that far from being a *moser*, they are demonstrating integrity and courage, that *shidduchs* will not be negatively impacted. It is up to community leaders to offset the terrifying prospect of ostracisation and social isolation that is so gravely feared by many families and individuals.

Social Workers and Chabad

Fortunately, systemic traits that characterise the Ultra-Orthodox society's response to child sexual abuse are being increasingly scrutinised by the wider community. As survivors tell their stories, as the Royal Commission asks questions, and as court cases expose child protection practices of institutions, we begin to hold irregular practices to account

An integral and often shocking part of this situation is that social work intervention is characterized by a child protection framework developed by unnamed people in the Ultra-Orthodox world. There is evidence of irregular professional practices. Female social workers are central to this insular and ineffective system.

In Australia, the absence of appropriate intervention by female health professionals is illustrated by the allegations of abuse at Adass Israel College, perpetrated by the school's former principal, Malka Leifer.

This case involves a victim, now aged in her twenties, who was abused between 2003 and 2006, beginning when she was fifteen years old. Detailed information about the case is available through the judgment handed down by the Supreme Court of Victoria by Justice John Rush, based on a civil action taken by the victim against the school and Mrs Leifer. ³⁷

Mrs Leifer was recruited from Israel and began to work at Adass Israel College, Melbourne, in December, 2002. The first staff member who become aware of suspicions of abuse was a teacher, Mrs Bromberg.

In August 2007, a psychologist and friend of Mrs Bromberg, Mrs Ruthie Casen, rang Mrs Bromberg, and during the course of the conversation she asked about the possibility that Mrs Leifer has crossed boundaries with the girls, "Is all in order there?" she asked.

Mrs Bromberg then spoke directly to Mrs Leifer, stating that she had reason to

suspect child sexual abuse. In fact, Mrs Bromberg was mandated to report suspicions of abuse immediately to the police. They are equipped to handle such investigations. It was not her duty to investigate, but 'investigate' she did, accepting Mrs Leifer's explanation without verifying it. This was eventually exposed as a lie.

As Mrs Bromberg took matters into her own hands, suspicions were not reported within the school or to the police. Effectively, Mrs Leifer was left to continue abusing girls.

Seven months later, in 2008, after another discussion with Mrs Casen, Mrs Bromberg was finally convinced that there was a serious problem at the school.

Mrs Bromberg then told two Rabbis about the problem. Two meetings were quickly convened. The first included three Rabbis, a lawyer and psychologist. The second meeting included members of the school's Committee of Management, the lawyer and psychologist. At this meeting, Mrs Leifer was stood down over the telephone and arrangements made for her to flee to Israel.

It is worth noting that upon moving to Israel, the victim of Leifer's alleged sexual assault sought therapeutic help with an orthodox social worker and counsellor, Ms Chana Rabinowitz. The victim's symptoms included flashbacks, nightmares and persistent depression, but she was let down by the system once again: Mrs Rabinowitz did not believe, at first instance, that abuse had occurred.

It was only after she confirmed the allegations with *two other parties*, the victim's sister and a person at the school, that Mrs Rabinowitz accepted the veracity of the victim's story.

Justice Rush was scathing of the fact that Mrs Bromberg consulted rabbis before consulting personnel of the school: "I find it remarkable that matters of such significance, concerning the potentially serious misconduct of the headmistress of the girls' campus would not be directly raised by an experienced teacher at the School with a person involved in the administration of the School itself."

Justice John Rush was also very critical of the manner in which the allegations were investigated by the Adass board, the board's decision to stand Leifer down and then arrange for her to be flown out of Australia within hours.³⁸

He found that the actions of the school were "deplorable" and "disgraceful", adding that he had no doubt that the conduct was deliberate and amounted to disgraceful, contumelious behaviour demonstrating a complete disregard for Mrs Leifer's victims.

Mrs Leifer is under house arrest in Israel awaiting extradition to Australia to face seventy-four charges of sexual assault. Authorities have been attempting to extradite her to Australia for almost two years. Her case has been delayed while

her lawyers argue that she is "mentally unfit" to attend extradition proceedings. It has been eight years since her flight.³⁹

I believe the case of Malka Leifer brutally highlights patterns of questionable professional practice within the Ultra-Orthodox Jewish community. It is not unusual practice for allegations of child sexual abuse in Ultra-Orthodox communities to be reported to the Rabbi in the first instance. Just like Mrs Bromberg spoke to Rabbis first when she finally accepted that there was a big problem at the school.

After a series of meetings, the decision was made not to report Mrs Leifer immediately. Instead, arrangements were made for her to be flown out of Australia as a matter of urgency. This effectively precluded the process of criminal investigation and conviction, processes that are often crucial to the healing process. The impact on the young victim has in fact added to her emotional distress. As she awaits closure, she recently stated publically, "I cannot go on much longer."

Very disturbingly, the decision to help Mrs Leifer return to Israel, also allowed an alleged abuser to continue to have access to children, this time Israeli children.

The case illustrates a conflict that both social workers and psychologists who work in this area face. What if the Rabbi's advice conflicts with professional obligations? "Should a social worker go along with the requirements of her culture, or uphold professional obligations that include the best interests of victims of abuse and the safety of children, whether they live in Israel or Australia?"

The same patterns of complicity between Ultra-Orthodox social workers and Rabbis have been revealed in other cases overseas.

Sima Yarmush, the twenty-eight-year-old daughter of a prominent Los Angeles Rabbi, recently spoke publicly at an event organised by Jewish Community Watch, about her experience of abuse. Sima also courageously posted her testimony on YouTube: "The manner in which my story of sexual abuse was dealt with is unacceptable."⁴⁰

"Young people who reach out for help need to be helped. When I finally reached out nine-and-a-half years ago, I was not helped. I was ignored."

Sima was abused for over two-and-a-half years by the assistant rabbi at her father's synagogue. When she finally found the courage to tell her parents, they went to Aleinu Jewish Family Services, in Los Angeles, and met with Ultra-Orthodox social worker Debbie Fox.

Debbie convened a hearing of a Halachic [Jewish Law] Advisory Board to hear Sima's allegations. Four "prestigious rabbis", one of whom was affiliated to the Chabad sect, were present at the hearing.

After listening to her experience in detail, the rabbis told Sima they "would take

care of everything." They instructed her not to talk to anyone. The alleged abuser was quietly sent to therapy. He moved to a nearby city where he continued to serve as a Jewish community leader.

Sima's parents were aware of the potential risk the alleged abuser posed to other children. They were left with a painful dilemma. How to tell the community there was a man who posed a danger without compromising their daughter's anonymity? They boldly made it known that the perpetrator had been removed from their congregation because of allegations of child sexual abuse.

But the rabbis did not support this action, as Sima states, "An esteemed [Ultra-Orthodox] rabbi said to my parents that they had absolutely no moral, legal, ethical or Halachic reason to say anything about the abuse to anybody."

Sima's family faced the aforementioned added pressure of missing a good *shidduch*, the tradition that has kept many abused victims silent out of fear of being viewed as "damaged goods."

According to Yerachmiel Lopin, who blogs about sex abuse in the orthodox community, Debbie Fox and Chana Rabonowitz are both associated with Darchei Binah Seminary and are both orthodox-trained social workers.⁴¹

Both Debbie Fox and Chana Rabonowitz were unwilling to believe a victim of sexual abuse without corroboration from other sources. If there is a pattern of Ultra-Orthodox therapists who overwhelmingly appear to be women, ignoring allegations against members of the Ultra-Orthodox Jewish community, it must be exposed and quashed before any genuine progress can be made in this field.

Debbie Fox founded the Magen Yeladim Child Safety Institute in 2013. The website states that Fox serves as Magen's director, consulting throughout the world on abuse prevention and intervention.⁴²

The International Federation of Social Workers defines the social work profession as "promoting social change, problem solving in human relationships and the empowerment and liberation of people to enhance well-being. Utilising theories of human behaviour and social systems, social work intervenes at the points where people interact with their environments. Principles of human rights and social justice are fundamental to social work."⁴³

I don't believe that these basic principles of social work guided Sima Yarmush's intervention.

As a social worker, a woman and a mother, I believe social workers and psychologists would be well resourced to gauge the impact of abuse on any victim, and that the vital role of the response to a disclosure of abuse in the recovery of the victim. Yet she was part of the system that allowed this to happen while Sima's was her client.

The Way Forward

As has been shown, there is still a great deal of work to be done before the ultra-orthodox Jewish community, and the women who are so integral to its being, might effectively address child abuse without the veil of secrecy and victim-blaming methodology.

It is instructive to look towards the outer world, as some excellent progress has been made in this area in other communities. At times of crisis in a community, it is common for one person or organisation to pave the way for change.

Beau Biden, the late son of American Vice President Joe Biden, was one such person. Tragically, Beau Biden passed away from brain cancer earlier in 2015, but he will forever be remembered for his tremendous work as Attorney General of the US State of Delaware and his role in prosecuting Earl Bradley, a serial paedophile and one of the worst child abusers in history.

Despite being primed to take his father's seat in the US Senate, Beau Biden decided not to run for candidacy. He chose to remain Attorney General of Delaware because he wanted to ensure that this child abuser would "never, ever be in a position to hurt another child." As a result of Biden's prosecution work, Bradley was sentenced to fourteen consecutive life sentences without parole.

Biden campaigned with the message that "Children cannot protect themselves, and very young children, who are often the target of predators, in many cases are unable to speak for themselves. As adults, we all have a responsibility to protect children and take action when we believe a child is being abused." This adult responsibility that Biden refers to is a key element in the Stewards of Children program, designed to prevent, recognise and react responsibly to child sexual abuse. ⁴⁴

In 2011, Biden's office partnered with the Darkness to Light Foundation to implement the tenets of the aforementioned Stewards of Children program. According to Biden, "Getting more adults to go through the Stewards of Children training is the single biggest step we can take to protect more kids from abuse in Delaware."

The Foundation identifies five elements of education, which, combined with an adult's duty to watch out for kids and report abuse, will be most effective:

1. Learn the facts
2. Learn how to minimise risk
3. Talk about it (includes teaching children personal safety rules)
4. Recognize the signs

5. React responsibly

These five elements reflect the centrality of adults to child abuse prevention. Tragically, the ultra-orthodox authorities have continued to miss some of the key lessons.

Real change will not come until there is a higher regard for comprehensive education, transparency, autonomy from rabbinical approval and a culture of full disclosure rather than silence.

Conclusion

In 2005, The Jewish Taskforce Against Family Violence and Sexual Assault announced that child sexual abuse was endemic in Jewish communities. This group of women volunteers, who worked in conjunction with rabbis, told us that they had the expertise and the will to implement a community plan to prevent and respond to child sexual abuse. And we believed them.

In 2011, Manny Waks' coming forward marked the beginning of the new awareness of child sexual abuse. Rabbis with whom we placed our trust were implicated in the cover-up of abuse as more stories became public. Rather than leveraging their leadership to ensure child safety, many community leaders refused to acknowledge or publicly denounce the cultural barriers to protecting children.

The approach of community organisations was to maintain these barriers, reinforcing the social hierarchies that placed the rabbis in complete control. The same volunteers who promised reform in 2005 minimised the rabbis' responsibility and culpability in not reporting abuse. They also failed to support the victims who had been bullied and intimidated by their own religious system.

While our spiritual leaders are in a position to spearhead change, child sexual abuse is a community issue that requires the action of all segments of the community. Orthodox Jews now realise the severity of the issue and are actively looking for solutions, but only within existing cultural frameworks. There is a need to step outside traditionalist thinking and face elements of Jewish tradition that prevent real action.

It is such elements of Jewish tradition that have managed to quash the female voice as an effective tool in the community response towards child sexual abuse. The examples given of female victims (both real and fictitious) demonstrate the way in which females are pushed into silence for fear of compromising their own purity or worthiness as a good *shidduch*.

Importantly, the gender hierarchy of ultra-orthodox Judaism, which places women in a submissive and docile position, is reinforced by female advocates and groups such as the Taskforce. While schools and various organisations claim they are

implementing child protection policies, such policies will not be effective without profound shifts in the cultural vocabulary around the very notion of femaleness.

The patriarchal system, unimpeachable rabbinic control and resistance to change are strong barriers, but we can change something immediately. We can mobilise a critical mass of informed and truthful adults, men and women, bringing them to the centre of the conversation.

Crucially, this way forward must also involve a new style of women's participation. Not the traditional model of hiding behind the voices of the rabbis and male leaders, but a stewardship of mothers, aunts, teachers and sisters that stems from the willingness to put children's safety first.

It is hoped that from this a wider, and wiser, community consciousness will grow.

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