

Whose Role Is It to Stop and Report Clerical Abuse?

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Twelve years ago, attorney Michael Leshner and I wrote a column for this newspaper about the tendency of too many rabbinic leaders to ignore the reality of sexual abuse in order to keep up the facade of a faultless Jewish community. At that time, the Catholic Church was reeling from charges that its prelates protected child-molesting priests, covering up the truth and silencing victims. Since then, we opined that cover-ups were common across religions.

Now, we may be proven wrong. The recent arrest of Rabbi Barry Freundel of the Keshet Israel Congregation in the Georgetown section of Washington, D.C., for placing secret cameras in his mikvah while female converts were preparing for ritual purification, has forced the Rabbinical Council of America to set up a committee to re-examine the entire conversion process and suggest practical safeguards against possible abuses.

Among the advocates and sex abuse survivors I have spoken to in the past few weeks, there are those who see this move by the RCA as nothing more than a stratagem.

“They are hiding behind a committee now just as they hid the complaints of the converts in 2012 and 2013 from the synagogue,” exclaimed one abuse survivor who asked that her identity be protected.

There are others, however, with a more sanguine view. They see the Freundel scandal as the moral “tipping point” that will galvanize rabbinic organizations such as the RCA to be proactive and responsive in the future at the first sign of a credible complaint of sexual exploitation.

The RCA is 1,000 members strong and has been around since 1935. Its current executive vice president, Rabbi Mark Dratch, is a diehard activist and genuinely outspoken advocate for abuse victims and survivors. I had the privilege of working with him a few years ago when he wrote an illuminating chapter for my book, *Tempest in the Temple: Jewish Communities and Child Sex Scandals*.

In his chapter, “A Community of Co-enablers: Why are Jews Ignoring Traditional Jewish Law and Protecting the Abuser?,” Dratch argued that “many systems, policies, and attitudes prevent innocents from receiving the protection they deserve and prevent perpetrators from being held accountable.” At the time, I feared Dratch was the lone voice in the wilderness of institutional inertia and lackluster policies.

Have we not learned how woefully inadequate Yeshiva University was in curtailing Rabbi George Finkelstein, a teacher and administrator at Y.U.’s high school for boys who allegedly wrestled and hugged boys inappropriately; or how ineffective the Orthodox Union was in reigning in Rabbi Baruch Lerner, who was eventually convicted of child sexual abuse?

The answer seems obvious. Rabbinic organizations, whether they represent the Orthodox, Conservative, Reform or Reconstructionist branches of Judaism, do not possess a superhuman ability to redress and rectify the transgressions of its clerical members, nor should they be expected to perform in that role.

Instead, we as Jews, as members of our synagogues, as members of our synagogue boards and committees, and as members of our community writ large, together have the power to stop clerical abuse. In fact, sex abuse in the Jewish clergy might prove to be the greatest test in our lifetime of “*Kol Yisrael arevim zeh la-zeh*,” the concept that all Jews — or all the people of Israel — are responsible for one another.

My colleague Michael Leshner has often said, “Progress is not automatic, nor is it likely to be smooth. Real progress will occur when ordinary Jews demand an end to the cover-ups — without exception and without equivocation. Only then will the rabbinate be sure to listen.” Perhaps herein lies the answer as to whether rabbinic organizations such as the RCA will successfully handle future complaints of sexual transgressions and exploits made against rabbis.