

Will the Jeffrey Epstein case serve as a wake-up call?

As a Jewish feminist and child advocate, I was horrified to learn of the cruel and abusive behavior committed by convicted sex offender and financier Jeffrey Epstein. I am doubly pained by the fact that he was a Jew. That is not because our religion is in any way immune to the transgressions that traverse all groups. We certainly are not immune, and we don't need to distance ourselves from Epstein out of shame.

“As a Jewish woman, I, too, cry out for justice not only for the Epstein victims, but for all the under-aged Jewish children who are forced into sexual slavery,” says Dr. Amy Neustein



**Dr. Amy
Neustein**

I am pained because the Epstein debacle — which comes down to the cloaking of his perversity and cruelty behind the banner of money and power — shows a very serious lapse in how we rein in members of our own community when their actions defy American law and the Torah.

There is a poetic cadence to the way this case ended in a jailhouse suicide. In secular terms, the suicide arguably could be seen as a craven response to the release of the 2,000-page record of his legion of contacts who were embroiled in his Byzantine world, which was made public just one day before he took his life. In religious terms, he took his life just one day before Tisha B'Av, the day we commemorate the desecration of our Holy Temple.

Taking his life right before the fast day makes it especially hard to escape the symbolic representation of his existence in this earthly world: it was nothing more than a colossal desecration of both God and humanity. The manner in which he ended his life — by self-strangulation — left his victims figuratively “hanging,” depriving them of the much needed closure to the wounds they suffered for years.

News reports show his victims crying out for justice, looking toward his alleged accomplices as new prosecutorial targets. As a Jewish woman, I, too, cry out for justice not only for the Epstein victims, but for all the under-aged Jewish children who are forced into sexual slavery. This is a topic I know a lot about.

More than three decades ago I became involved in a painful legal drama involving my daughter, who was left to suffer at the hands of an alleged pedophile and those who protected him rather than her. The story was described by attorney Karen Winner in her book “Divorced from Justice” as “the most notorious case on record.” A New York Magazine cover story on pedophilia referred to me as “the issue’s best-known cause célèbre.” What was never written about, because at the time it was too shocking to reckon with, was the vast network of power, from the religious institutions that exercised power over lay authorities, to the legal and governmental institutions

that failed spectacularly and deliberately, by shielding the alleged pedophile – not the child – at every step of the way.

In 1986, my mother, a rabbi's wife, walked into a room and witnessed her grandchild – my daughter – in the tight grip of her father. She was horrified and grabbed my daughter away immediately. My mother gave a detailed account to the district attorney of Ulster County, who found her account credible. But my child never was allowed to testify before the Ulster County grand jury, nor was she allowed to be interviewed by the district attorney. Why?

The answer is simple. A succession of New York power brokers stepped in to wield unusual influence in this case. First, my mother's report of eye witnessing the abuse brought forward a controversial publicly funded agency, the Brooklyn Society for Prevention of Cruelty to Children. In a memo to the New York State Legislature, Jeremiah B. McKenna, chief counsel to the New York State Senate Committee on Crime and Correction, would write that he called upon a contact whom he had "worked with on a kiddie porn investigation" and found out this agency was "known to assist divorced Orthodox Jewish fathers in child custody cases." He later would write, in a letter to the New York City Human Resources Administration, that "Amy Neustein is a victim of a criminal conspiracy."

Second, after the father made what the agency called "social visits" to the higher ups at the BSPCC, his request not to be investigated for sexual abuse was obliged willingly. He never had to answer any questions about his daughter. Instead, I was charged by the BSPCC with "neglect" for making a report of abuse "that was not totally true," even though my child confirmed the abuse to the agency workers and later to a leading child abuse expert who supported the child's claims. It was not easy for my child to talk to the workers who boasted of their repeatedly telling her about the "danger" she was posing to her father by speaking openly. Yet, as a result of this undoubtedly baseless charge of neglect, my child was seized from me immediately and placed in a foster home in Brooklyn.

Once in foster care, the agency told the Ulster County DA that he would have to "move heaven and earth" to get them to allow the child to cooperate with a grand jury investigation. They also made it known they would give testimony in support of the father. The case was dropped.

There was another report of suspected abuse by the father, this time made by the foster mother. The report was not investigated. Around the same time, my child's teacher told me that my daughter was very upset because she was forced "to go on appointments" every evening and "couldn't do her homework." My daughter became obsessed with "modelling" and complained about her figure constantly. In a letter from Kathy Rosenthal, a founding member at the National Center for Missing and Exploited Children, to the commissioner of the Administration of Children's Services, she would say that photos of the child "showed a child being groomed for child erotica."

By the age of 8, a once heavy-set child had become so slim that a shunt had to be placed in her heart because of severe anorexia nervosa. At the emergency

room at Kings County Hospital they found her to be severely dehydrated and emaciated. The admitting doctor testified, and told the press that the child was “by far the worst case of emaciation he had ever seen” and thought “she could possibly die.” After my child regained her strength she confronted her father in the hospital. A nurse overheard her say “You got me into this. If you don’t get me out of here, I’m going to tell everything.” The father asked social services not to investigate him for sex abuse — and they oblige.

Ironically, it was Jeffrey Epstein’s high profile that finally proved his downfall. Power protects such perverts until the protectors themselves are put under a spotlight. We need to force such agencies and powerful protectors to become as accountable for their actions as those they are trying to protect. Let Jeffrey’s Epstein sordid life and suspicious death act as a clarion call to stand strong against the rich and powerful.

Because if we don’t, we will have desecrated everything we hold dear.

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