

## Jewish Women International Tackles Child-Abuse by Rabbis in the Orthodox Community

Child sex abuse is not a topic often discussed publicly in connection with the Jewish clergy. But what is least acknowledged is often most dangerous.

That was the message behind the invitation extended by Jewish Women International (JWI, formerly B'nai Brith Women) to four Orthodox Jews whose experience has drawn them together on this unlovely but significant issue. Attorney Michael Leshner, sociologist Dr. Amy Neustein, Rabbi Mark Dratch, and rabbinic child-abuse victim Mark Weiss all appeared on ABC's Nightline on October 11 to discuss their different roles in a case of child sexual abuse allegedly perpetrated by Avrohom Mondrowitz, a self-styled Orthodox rabbi who fled to Israel in 1985 after be-

ing indicted in Brooklyn on charges of sexually molesting children.

On November 2, as part of JWI's non-denominational National Alliance to End Domestic Abuse in the Jewish Community, the four spoke via nationwide teleconference to social workers, mental health professionals, lawyers, and clergy on the topic, "Betraying the Trust: Rabbis and Child Sex Abuse."

### Bringing Change

Moderator Geri Elias identified the purpose at the outset: "To bring changes in the ways that the legal system, the community, and the rabbinic leaders treat victims and handle allegations [of child sexual abuse]."

While all the speakers on the panel were Orthodox Jews, Ms. Elias stressed in an inter-

view after the teleconference, that JWI recognized the problem as not solely an Orthodox issue, but, rather, one that crops up in every community.

Asked about this issue, Rabbi Steven Pruzansky, spiritual leader of Congregation Bnai Yeshurun in Teaneck and an attorney, cautioned the Orthodox community against "terming every problem a crisis and every public concern of necessity a Jewish problem."

"These crimes do occur in the Jewish world and should be prosecuted fully," he said. "But we should avoid the unfortunate tendency of exaggerating the number of incidents in order to bolster the notion that 'we are just like everyone else.' In fact, we are not. The number of actual incidents is very small,

prosecutions even fewer, and we have to be careful not to paint with such a broad brush that our children—most of whom will never even remotely encounter such perversions—do not lose their innocence, or respect for their teachers as individuals or as a group."

### More Than an Individual

All the speakers on the teleconference panel emphasized that a child who accuses a rabbi of sexual abuse is accusing more than an individual.

Rabbi Dratch—founder and CEO of JSafe (Jewish Institute Supporting an Abuse-Free Environment)—said that because abuse by a rabbi "flies in the face of everything we expect of our respected religious leaders," the community tends to feel

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threatened by the accusation.

"Within certain parts of our community, there can be a conspiracy of the community, and the pressure not to speak up, not to report to civil authorities, not to deal with the outside," he said.

### Community Pressure

Dr. Neustein, an author and researcher on the topic, as well as the daughter of a prominent Orthodox rabbi, agreed. In 20 years of interviewing victims, she said, she had repeatedly found them to feel that they, not their abusers, had been cast out—both from the Jewish community and from Judaism.

She quoted a Jewish abuse victim who wrote to a rabbi: "I have nothing to say to G-d, because like all abused as children, I expect no response that will help. He offers no comfort, only stress and complication."

Some victims, she said, have literally been driven out of town by community pressure.

"Instead of seeing the abuse as a community problem, and something that we must address, the blame is shifted to the victim," she said.

### Unexposed

Mr. Weiss told the conference that when he told his parents he had been sexually abused by Rabbi Mondrowitz, they at first refused to believe him.

"My parents were completely unexposed to this type of thing—this type of corruption in the community was something that they had never heard of," he said.

It took time before even they could accept their son's revelation that the Jewish community was not always what they had believed.

### Obstructing Justice

Probably the most disturbing topic in the discussion con-

cerned the ways in which Jewish communities sometimes stand in the way of justice.

Dr. Neustein recalled "an aggressive campaign of suppression of sexual abuse [evidence]." She quoted Rabbi Mordechai Glick of Montreal, a vice president of Nefesh, an international organization of Orthodox Jewish mental health care professionals, who warned, in a letter to *The Jewish Press*, that if a sex-abuse case reaches the police, "a massive cover up and pressure campaign usually ensues" to prevent the case from being prosecuted.

Mr. Leshner, a writer and attorney who currently represents many Jewish victims of sexual abuse, echoed that concern.

"I wish I could tell you that every time you walk into the office of a District Attorney or prosecutor, you're going to be met with complete sympathy and with a complete understanding of what your rights are. It isn't always so. Prosecutors are . . . susceptible to political pressures," he said.

### No Intimidation

Mr. Leshner cited New York law requiring every District Attorney to maintain procedures that protect victims and witnesses from intimidation, and suggested that the need for such procedures in dealing with Jewish victims has not been fully recognized.

"We need to let [officials] know—individual victims and as a community—that lots of us want to see these cases pursued, lots of us want to see victims' rights vindicated," he said.

Mr. Weiss—who is still waiting for his alleged abuser to be brought to justice—said that he is trying to improve the environment for victims

by increasingly taking on an activist's role and refusing to hide his own story.

"I have always been very open about this with my wife and children," he said, adding that he wants his children to be able to set boundaries and to report promptly any wrong done to them—things he felt unable to do as a child.

### More Openness

Rabbi Dratch agreed that more openness on the topic is essential. "Despite what we'd like to think about our community, we have all sorts of problems, and that includes rabbinic sexual abuse," he said.

As it is, "too many rabbis, unfortunately, are not properly trained in this area, and can make very big mistakes in listening, in responding, and in moving things forward," he said.

Rabbi Dratch said he knows of several cases in which Jewish schools or synagogues have received sexual-abuse complaints but have not deemed them sufficiently well supported to report to authorities. That, he said, is an error under today's mandatory reporting laws.

While the laws concerning who qualifies as a mandated reporter vary from state to state, most statutes designate medical and mental-health providers, officers of the court and law-enforcement personnel, teachers, and, increasingly, clergy.

"The theory behind mandated reporting laws is that the responsibility for sifting the evidence to determine whether there's enough of a case to take to court, really belongs to law enforcement or Child Protective Services," said Mr. Leshner.

### Credibility

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Lurking behind the conference, for Rabbi Pruzansky, was the issue of credibility of such accusations and the problem of how to balance the rights of the accused before he is found guilty with the rights of the alleged victim for vindication and justice.

"We have to be very careful to ensure the credibility of the accusations as best we can—mindful that *pikuach nefesh*—the saving of a life—operates two ways in these cases. Children who have been or are at risk of being victimized need our help and protection, but

one who is publicly embarrassed under false pretenses has had his life taken away also. This knotty problem is one that society generally wrestles with, without any perfect modality. Just think of the McMartin case in Los Angeles in the early 1980's, and one recognizes the actual injury that can result to one falsely accused," said Rabbi Pruzansky.

Others have pointed to the Tawana Brawley case in which a teenager's false accusations destroyed the lives of several police officers. Some say the recent case of the Duke Lacrosse players accused of

raping an exotic dancer at a raucous party may be similar.

### "Compelling and Complicated"

Calling the issue of credibility "compelling and complicated and one that vexes prosecutors in these cases," Rabbi Pruzansky called for extreme caution in "making accusations of such a despicable crime, in which—in the public eye—a mere indictment is tantamount to a conviction."

"The accused's reputation never recovers from such an accusation, even if the charges are withdrawn or he is acquitted at trial. One need not accuse the prosecution of bowing to political pressure to decline prosecution, when in fact it might simply be a reasonable exercise of prosecutorial discretion owing to the lack of corroborating evidence," said Rabbi Pruzansky. "Because of the nature of our community, and its norms and standards, we can't simply arrest first and ask questions later. This question, then, of how to know when to report and when to prosecute, does not lend itself to simplistic answers."

Asked about this issue, Dr. Neustein explained that, as a sociologist, she is trained to examine and measure social phenomena "with utmost precision and care," but, as the daughter of a prominent rabbi, she finds herself "particularly sensitive to the devastating effects of sex abuse charges against rabbis that might be in error or, even worse, motivated by malice."

### Seeking Support

All the participants in the teleconference suggested ways the community can offer more support for sex-abuse victims.

Rabbi Dratch called for more public discussion, improved training for rabbis, clearer policies for handling complaints (designed to promote procedures that are fair to both accuser and accused), and prevention programs in Jewish schools, camps and synagogues.

Referring to Mark Weiss's confession that he "didn't know what it [sexual abuse] was" at age 13, Rabbi Dratch argued that such naiveté shouldn't persist among Jewish youth.

### Organization of Record


According to JSafe's website, the organization sees itself as the group to

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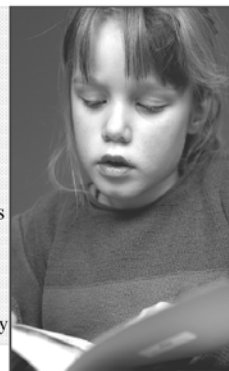
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rectify the situation. Rabbi Dratch envisions JSafe as establishing “a certification program for every Jewish school, camp, youth organization, JCC, congregation, and temple” to ensure “that survivors are treated supportively and appropriately” and that perpetrators are made “accountable for their improprieties.”

Rabbi Dratch’s goal is to issue the “JSafe logo” to every certified Jewish institution and then to “educate the public to look for this certification before sending their children to a particular school, camp, or other program.”

According to the website, “there will be an initial fee for the first certification and a subsequent, lesser fee, for recertification. The fees will be a function of the size of the number of trainees.”

**First Line of Defense**

Asked for his recommendations, Rabbi Pruzansky said he strongly encourages parents, as the first line of defense, to cultivate sufficiently strong relationships with their children so that any abrupt changes in behavior or mood that often accompany actual abuse would be recognized.

“Even if there is no ‘smoking gun,’ I believe parents should not hesitate to inform the school—if that is where the suspected abuse took place—of their concerns, so the teacher can be observed more carefully and even informed that his conduct might be perceived as inappropriate,” he said, adding that, in any case, a trained therapist should be consulted immediately in order to glean more information and begin appropriate intervention.

Signs of abuse or reports of similar cases of abuse involving the same adult would leave Rabbi Pruzansky with “no hesitation in reporting the incident to the police and having an arrest made.”

“Pikuach nefesh demands as much, and it would be outrageous and unconscionable that a teacher—suspected and terminated, but not prosecuted—simply moves on to another teaching position in another city, or Israel,” he said.

Mr. Leshner urged listeners of the teleconference to seek more victim-friendly child abuse laws.

**“Hidden Agenda”**

A rabbi in Passaic County who also listened to the JWJ teleconference, said he was concerned about possible “hidden agendas.” The rabbi, who asked that his name be withheld, said he recognized

that Dr. Neustein was a researcher and, therefore, could discuss her own and others’ investigations, and that Mr. Weiss, as a victim of child rabbinic-abuse, was worthy of praise for relating his tragic story and offering to help and protect others. As an attorney for such victims, Mr. Leshner was serving as a zealous advocate for his clients, “and doing a superb job,” said the rabbi.

He said he worried that Rabbi Dratch, who founded and directs JSafe, might have a “vested interest” in overstating the case for sexual abuse in the Orthodox community. “I agree that one case is one too many, but if there is very little

sexual abuse—especially rabbinic sexual abuse—then perhaps his whole organization is unnecessary,” said the rabbi.

Perhaps mindful of feelings like that in the community, Dr. Neustein concluded her remarks at the conference by calling for “honesty, openness, and an exercise of restraint” when confronted with sex-abuse allegations against rabbis. The goal, she said, is for neither victims nor alleged offenders to be subject to ostracism and shame by the community in which they live.

“If we could just embrace a higher level of moral ethics, I think we’re half way there,” she said. S.L.R.

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