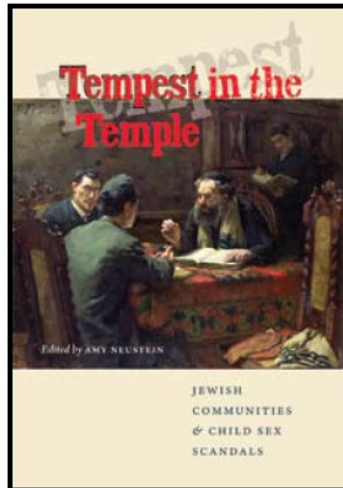


Cleaning Up Our Own Backyard

For more than 20 years, Dr. Amy Neustein has been tackling the sticky issue of child-molestation, especially in the Jewish community. For years, it has been a lonely struggle, with many people in the community castigating her for even suggesting there might be a problem.

But there is evidence now that an increasing number of Jews are willing to look at the issue honestly, usually concluding that while it may not be a crisis of epidemic proportions, as some polemicists have proclaimed, it is a challenge, and one case is one too many.

Dr. Neustein is the author of numerous articles on the subject as well the co-author with Michael Leshner of the book, *From Madness to Mutiny: Why Mothers Are Running from the Family Courts—and What Can Be Done about It*. She has just edited a new book, entitled *Tempest in the Temple: Jewish Communities and Child Sex Scandals*, published by Brandeis



University Press.

Debut Forums

On Tuesday, March 3, the book will have its formal debut as Dr. Neustein participates in a program entitled "The Evolving Balance: Abuse in Religious Communities and the Law" at Yeshiva University's Cardozo Law School in Manhattan.

A few days later, on Sunday, March 15, the Union for Traditional Judaism in Teaneck will likewise tackle the issue of child molestation and domestic violence in the Jewish community in a forum presentation entitled "Protecting Our Most Vulnerable: Child Abuse in the Jewish Community."

Two of the experts participating in the panel discussion at UTJ have contributed to Dr. Neustein's new book: Rabbi Mark Dratch, executive director of JSafe, a nonprofit organization committed to combating child abuse and domestic violence; and Mr. Leshner, a Passaic-based

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The Most Vulnerable

writer and attorney who has fought on behalf of mothers and children navigating the family court system as well as adults who were abused as children in Jewish schools and other institutions.

The other panel participants will be Rabbi Fred Hyman of Massachusetts; Dr. Michael Kaplowitz, a psychiatrist in private practice; and Dr. Rachel Yehuda, a professor of psychiatry and neurobiology at Mount Sinai School of Medicine and director of its Traumatic Stress Division.

Ignoring Evidence

The Jewish community's reaction to charges of sexual abuse is a subject with

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which Dr. Neustein is all too familiar.

In 1986, her now-late mother accused Dr. Neustein's former husband, Dr. Ozzie Orbach, of sexually abusing their then-six-year-old daughter, Sherry. Ignoring mounds of evidence substantiating the mother's claim, including the child's demonstration on anatomically correct dolls and Sherry's own reports of her father's abuse that a qualified expert strongly suspected were true, the judge decided Dr. Neustein had "coached" Sherry to believe she had been abused.

He granted Dr. Orbach full custody of Sherry and allowed Dr. Neustein visiting privileges only under supervision. That scant

contact with her only child came to an end in 1988, when Dr. Neustein and the woman allowed by the court to supervise her visitations, Rebbetzin Rachel Anolick, became alarmed at Sherry's drastic weight loss. Ignoring the family court judge's admonition not to seek medical care for her child without the father's permission, Dr. Neustein and Rebbetzin Anolick took Sherry to the Kings County Hospital Emergency Room, where, as the pediatrician on-call, Dr. Jeffrey Birnbaum, later testified, Sherry was "by far the worst case of emaciation I have ever seen."

Despite the fact that Dr. Birnbaum told the court that if the child had not been hospitalized, she might have died, adding that he had been struck by Sherry's sexualized behavior "that seemed grossly inappropriate for a girl her age," the family court judge punished Dr. Neustein by suspending all her visitation privileges. She has not seen Sherry since.

Sublimating Pain

While Dr. Neustein has not written about her experience herself, over the years, many newspaper accounts have detailed her story. She has won the support of numerous political leaders and women's and child advocacy groups, but no one was ever able to move the court to change its ruling.

Although Sherry is now a 28-year-old attorney with the Juvenile Law Center in Philadelphia, she has refused all contact with her mother.

Dr. Neustein has sublimated her own pain over the loss of her daughter by becoming a champion of women throughout the US whose experiences in family court are not so different from her own. Her advocacy for women forced to fight for custody of their children after the father has been credibly accused of abusing them sexually prompted the New York Chapter of the National Organization of Women to recognize her as a symbol on "Childless Mother's Day." Three years ago, the Battered Mothers Custody Conference, held in upstate New York, honored her with its Woman of Valor Lifetime Achievement Award.

Communal Anguish

Her work as a child advocate and, she said, her anguish over not being able to save her own daughter, has led Dr. Neustein to turn her attention to children who have fallen

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The Most Vulnerable

victim to abusers within the Jewish community. As the daughter of an Orthodox rabbi, she said, she is "mortified" over the recent spate of cases involving rabbis accused of

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molesting children, yeshiva principals accused of protecting teachers who have been cited for sexual abuse, and Jewish husbands abusing their wives and children.

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Just recently, Dr. Neustein has begun a campaign to raise the awareness of a local community to a case that she has first-hand reason to believe involves an Orthodox-Jewish father who has been subjecting his 26-year-old autistic daughter to emotional and physical abuse.

These types of cases, coupled with reports of threats and verbal intimidation against members of the Jewish community who have come out in support for the victims, motivated UTJ to hold the program planned for March 15, according to Rabbi Ronald Price, the organization's executive vice president.

He said it was a tragedy that some Jewish religious leaders have shown "more concern for the reputation of the accused than protection of the victims themselves."

"How can this be?" said Rabbi Price. "Neither Torah nor two millennia of Jewish Law permits or condones violence against one's spouse, child, student, or camper. *Halachah* instructs us to protect and support our most vulnerable. So when victims of domestic violence cry for help, we must listen."

Starting at Home

Although due to a scheduling conflict, Dr. Neustein will not be present at the UTJ forum, her new book will be available.

The program will be held at UTJ headquarters, 811 Palisade Ave. in Teaneck.

Registration is at 9:30am, and the program will go from 10am to 1pm.

For more information, contact the UTJ office at 201-801-0707.

Echoing the sentiments expressed by Dr. Neustein in her book, Rabbi Price said, "It is not tolerable for the leadership of the Jewish community, halachic or secular, to ignore the scourge of abuse in our community or anywhere in society. Before we can be critical of others, however, we must be sure that we have cleaned up our own backyard."

S.L.R.