

JEWISH EXPONENT

— WHAT IT MEANS TO BE JEWISH IN PHILADELPHIA —

Opinion | Helping mothers of #MeToo children

September 22, 2019

By Amy Neustein

The fact that Jewish children were victims of sexual abuse during the Holocaust does not come as a surprise to anyone, simply because during wartime we expect unspeakable crimes to be committed against society's most defenseless. Yet the problem remains today; Jewish children continue to be victims.



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So much so, in fact, that earlier this summer, right around the time that late financier and convicted sex offender Jeffrey Epstein made headline news for running an elaborate child-sex trafficking network, the Washington Post published the findings of a George Washington University Law School study showing that mass numbers of children in the United States are delivered daily into the hands of abusers. Professor Joan Meier, author of this study, closely examined nearly 5,000 family court cases around the country. She found a very disturbing pattern: In case after case where there is strong evidence of sexual abuse, competent mothers are losing custody, and often all contact with their children, to the sexual offender at “staggering rates.”

The reason, according to the study, is that courts throughout the country have become tainted by a popular quack theory, known as PAS (parental alienation syndrome), first introduced by a controversial psychiatrist, Richard Gardner, who worked out of his Cresskill, New Jersey, office until his death in 2003. Nonetheless, his theories live on and have justified the shoveling of large numbers of children, sometimes as young as 3 and 4 years old, into the hands of sexual predators.

So why is this a Jewish problem? The reason is that first it is happening to Jewish children, and that makes it morally a Jewish problem. Second, it is a community problem, namely because as Jews we are inextricably tied to the community and therefore responsible for one another. Because our identity is forged as community members rather than solely as individuals, we tend to feel knife-

stabbing pain when a member of our community is hurt. Third, we have, in good faith, worked hard to build up social service agencies and foster care programs in our community, which unfortunately have sometimes proven to be a part of the problem.

As a community we can take the first step in solving this problem by remembering how our tradition exalts women in Jewish society. We enter the Sabbath with the delightful serenade “Eshet Chayil” (“Woman of Valor”) as we gather around the Friday night dinner table. Our wise forefathers have taught us to cherish our Jewish women and to hold them in veneration. Can these be the same Jewish women we bludgeon in the courts with character assassinations of “liar,” “prevaricator” and “manipulator”?

This cannot be tolerated any longer. We need to stand with placards outside the family courts, restoring the reputation of Jewish women being beaten mercilessly behind the closed (and sometimes locked) doors of our nation’s courtrooms. We need to call upon our religious community leaders to speak out from the pulpit in shul, to speak out at conferences and community rallies and to speak softly to those sitting around the Sabbath table. In this way we can begin the process of rehabilitating the reputations of our Jewish mothers, who are not liars and cheats trying to pin “false” charges on an innocent man.

While a good man, in some cases, may be vilified by a misdirected woman desperate to hold onto her children, studies from the American Bar Association show that “deliberately false charges of sexual abuse” in a custody proceeding are “exceedingly rare.” Legal scholars have found such false charges to fall within a 3-6% range, certainly not enough to tar and feather an entire population of protective mothers, including the many Jewish mothers who make up this population, with wholly unwarranted upbraid and rebuke.

The second step we can take is to form an immediate task force of lawyers, policymakers, mental health experts and protective mothers, and to ask for a meeting with the U.S. Department of Health and Human Services. Under the auspices of CAPTA (Child Abuse Prevention and Treatment Act), HHS can order a review of cases of children placed in the hands of sexual abusers and command the local child welfare agency to go into court and request the judge to return the child to its mother. This federal mandate gives legal authority to rescue children from ill-fated court decisions. The Torah gives us the moral authority to help mothers of #MeToo children, for it says in the book of Isaiah, “Can a mother forget her child?”

Can we forget the mothers in our community? I say not.

Amy Neustein is author of From Madness to Mutiny: Why Mothers are Running from the Family Courts – and What Can Be Done About It (Northeastern University Press) and editor of Tempest in the Temple: Jewish Communities and Child-Sex Scandals (Brandeis University Press)