Power of the People
Whose role is it to stop and report clerical abuse?

By AMY NEUSTEIN

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delve years ago, attorney Michael Lesher and I wrote a column for the Jewish Exponent 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 priests, covering up the truth and prelates protecting child-molesting clerics, were the cause of 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.

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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.

Instead, we as Jews, 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 Lesher 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.

Amy Neustein is an author and lecturer based in Fort Lee, N.J. This article originally appeared in the Philadelphia Jewish Exponent.