



Amy Neustein, ed. *Tempest in the Temple: Jewish Communities and Child Sex Scandals*. Brandeis Series in American Jewish History, Culture, and Life. Waltham: Brandeis University Press, 2009. 308 pp. \$35.00 (cloth), ISBN 978-1-58465-671-5.

Reviewed by Orlee Hauser (University of Wisconsin - Oshkosh)

Published on H-Judaic (November, 2010)

Commissioned by Jason Kalman

Not a Comfortable Read: Breaking the Silence on Sexual Abuse in Jewish Communities

With allegations of church-based sex abuse increasing worldwide, this collection of essays is especially significant. Jewish communities have often been tempted to buy into the misguided belief that sexual abuse is a problem that does not affect us—at least not directly. This important book not only dispels this belief, but also outlines, through firsthand accounts of clergy, educators, lawyers, and therapists, the complex nature of this phenomenon and provides useful tools for addressing the problem in its many different facets.

The book begins in a surprising place. It does not begin with the predictable overarching academic essay on the nature of abuse within the Jewish community. In its place we find, “Unholy Waters,” Loel Weiss and Mark Itzkowitz’s fascinating firsthand account of their synagogue’s hazzan being accused of rape, and the details of their stage-by-stage response. Throughout the narrative they demonstrate the importance of dealing with this issue honestly and stress the education of the congregation along the way. Their emphasis on openness and integrity sets the stage well for the chapters to come.

Indeed, the theme of sincerity versus secrecy runs throughout this collection and is epitomized by Barbara Blaine’s account of her creation of the Survivors Network of those Abused by Priests (SNAP), a support group for victims of clerical abuse in the Catholic Church. Blaine exposes systemic protection and enabling of abuse by the church itself in a manner that manages to convey to the reader the sense of frustration involved in her search for justice. Michael Leshner’s chapter describing his role in the chase and capture of the infamous Rabbi Avrohom Mondrowitz provides much of the same sense of frustration, this time with various authorities and religious figures in

both the United States and Israel. These chapters neighbor each other in the collection and point the reader to a strong realization that the systematic covering of abuse is not limited to media dramas, nor is it limited in its religious scope. Moreover, it instills a sense of the harm that is rooted in keeping silent on these matters.

While the chapters in this collection are divided into three sections: “Breaking Vows,” “Sacrificing Victims,” and “Let Me Know the Way,” it is, unfortunately, only in the second section that a distinctively Jewish voice begins to emerge. The first section leaves the reader asking questions about what, if anything, makes abuse from Jewish clergy and leaders different. This is remedied by one of the strongest chapters, “Out of the Jewish Closet” by Joyanna Silberg and Stephanie Dallam in which they examine the nature of abuse in orthodox communities. The authors point out the taboo nature of the subject, linking this to concerns over marriage prospects for abused girls and to a history of Jewish persecution. They give readers a sense of the psychological effects of abuse through their sharing of a case study and quotations from Jewish survivors. They bring the issue home to readers of the Jewish faith by discussing the observance level of abuse victims and the pain and loss created by the association of abusive acts with religious figures and teachers.

The following chapter, “A Community of Co-enablers” by Mark Dratch, continues to emphasize the Jewish context of sexual abuse as does the chapter by Amy Neustein and Leshner, “Justice Interrupted.” While the former addresses issues of Jewish law concerning protecting victims, the latter reviews the cases of Rabbi Solomon Hafner, Rabbi Mondrowitz, and Rabbi Yehuda Kolko, and outlines how the reli-

gious courts were used to obstruct justice. It would have been interesting to read these chapters back to back as their narratives are juxtaposed. While one chapter speaks of the Jewish obligation to intervene: “there is no such thing in Jewish law as an ‘innocent bystander,’” the other examines the behavior of the rabbinical courts (as well as the D. A. Charles Hynes) and their attempts to silence the victim (p. 107). Clearly, the gap between halachic theory and the way it was practiced is infuriating to read.

Dratch ends his chapter with a list of practical suggestions for communities aiming to better protect children. Indeed, the collection has pieces of valuable advice of this nature throughout. Robert Weiss’s chapter is especially educational and aids in the reader’s understanding of the subject at hand. However, some of the collection’s earlier information seems disconnected to the focus and is somewhat out of place. The chapter by Michelle Friedman, “Crossing the Line,” for instance, is a well-written and interesting piece on the blurring of professional boundaries that touches on the topic of sexual abuse. However, while extremely useful as a guide for people in the rabbinic field, the advice offered surrounding impression management and appropriate versus inappropriate relationships does not speak to the culture of sexual abuse. In fact, the languid reader may deduce that sexual abuse may take place much by accident! While this was, clearly, not the author’s intent, its

placement at the front of the collection may lead to this confusion.

This collection can certainly be considered illuminating. Moreover, it is necessary. As Erica Brown points out in her chapter “Straying the Course,” abuse of this nature does damage to victims, to communities, and also to faith itself. One of the most important points in this collection can be found in this chapter: “The fact that a rabbi who abuses congregants or students in a youth group, synagogue, or school setting may *also* be an acclaimed teacher or mesmerizing lecturer is not beside the point. It is the point” (p. 62). Indeed, it is the faith that we place in our religious leaders that makes abuse of this nature so very damaging, and, more important, so very possible. It is undoubtedly time that Jewish communities everywhere wake up to this fact and begin to make ourselves a bit less comfortable by loudly breaking the silence.

Only several chapters of this collection are written from a purely academic perspective, and, thus, the collection would be useful only as supplementary reading in a sociology or history course. However, the collection’s ability to provide real insight into the issue of sexual abuse in Jewish communities makes it especially useful for those training to be clerics and community leaders. Indeed, it should be required reading.

If there is additional discussion of this review, you may access it through the list discussion logs at:

<http://h-net.msu.edu/cgi-bin/logbrowse.pl>.

Citation: Orlee Hauser. Review of Neustein, Amy, ed., *Tempest in the Temple: Jewish Communities and Child Sex Scandals*. H-Judaic, H-Net Reviews. November, 2010.

URL: <http://www.h-net.org/reviews/showrev.php?id=25389>



This work is licensed under a Creative Commons Attribution-NonCommercial-No Derivative Works 3.0 United States License.