

## A Peek Under The Rug

**Rabbi Mark Dratch** (01/05/2007)

Just a decade ago, the issue of sexual abuse in the Orthodox Jewish community was merely whispered about by some, discussed behind closed doors by few, and hushed up by many. It was certainly not a significant part of many public discussions and forums.

And yet this Thanksgiving weekend it was featured prominently on the agendas of the annual conventions of the Union of Orthodox Jewish Congregations of America, where I had the privilege of addressing the topic openly, and the Agudath Israel of America.

Prominent rabbinical leaders who spoke for the Agudah included Rabbi Matisyahu Salomon, the mashgiach of Bais Medrash Govoha; Rabbi Ephraim Wachsman, rosh hayeshiva of Maor Yitzchok; and Rabbi Chaim Dovid Zwiebel, the Agudah's executive vice president for government and public affairs.

Acknowledgment of a problem is the first major step in confronting it. So we have come a long way, but we still have a long way to go. After all, the emphasis of the Agudah presentations was not on helping victims of abuse, but on calling for decent and responsible speech (which was judged to be lacking in many blogs which bring allegations to light) and on protecting the dignity and honor of many prominent Torah leaders (who have been subject to harsh criticism for their perceived mishandling of abuse cases). Nothing wrong with that—as far as it goes. Lashon hara (derogatory speech), lashon nekiah (decent speech), and kevod ha-Torah (respect for Torah and its teachers) are fundamental values in our tradition. But there are other fundamental values as well.

It is most appropriate for an organization like Agudath Israel to address head-on the issue of the molestation of innocent bodies and souls, the issue of the honor due to the tzelem Elokim (image of God) in which everyone is created and is violated when a person is abused, and the issue of correcting the misguided communal values and pressures which discourage and prevent victims from coming forward and getting the help they desperately need.

With all due respect to Rabbis Salomon, Wachsman and Zwiebel, I do not believe that many of the bloggers and accusers they roundly condemn and label as “resha'im” (wicked) or “maskilim” (corruptly modern) were motivated by a disdain for rabbis, their authority or their opinions. At least not originally.

My experience with many victims/survivors of abuse is that they desperately want rabbinic leaders and the community and the Torah and the halachic system—which they were taught to revere and upon which they were raised to depend—to work for them.

Many believe that rabbis and rabbinic judges are advocates for those that were hurt and injured. Many, whose physical and emotional welfare were torn apart, want, at the very least, their faith to sustain them and remain strong. But many of those who speak out in crude and insolent ways have felt betrayed by those very rabbis and communal mores in which they desperately wanted to believe. Many felt revictimized by those they believed should have been there to help them. So they lash out with feelings of betrayal, disillusionment, abandonment and resentment. This is perhaps no excuse for crude behavior, but perhaps an explanation...and an indictment.

Rabbi Salomon responded to the accusation that these matters were being swept under the rug through denial and cover-up by stating that, in fact, he and his colleagues have dealt with cases of abuse (kudos for this public admission) and that they do indeed sweep these matters under the rug—in the sense that they keep their efforts discreet in order to protect human dignity. Unfortunately, it appears to many of us that in doing so the human dignity of many victims has not been protected. It appears to many of us that in doing so perpetrators have been allowed to remain where they can perpetrate again and again.

It appears to many of us that misrepresented piskei halachah (halachic decisions)—like that of the gadol who was quoted as ruling that without penetration there has been no abuse, or those who promulgate prohibitions of speaking out because of lashon hara and mesirah—have been detrimental to the welfare of victims and have not been publicly corrected. It appears to many of us that the opinions of poskei ha-dor (leading halachic figures) in these areas have been roundly ignored by many (like those of Rav Shlomo Zalman Auerbach and Rav Yosef Shalom Elyashiv that obligate the reporting of known child abusers to the police in America).

When our community and its leaders will act efficiently, appropriately, and responsibly, their critics will be silenced. When allegations are listened to seriously and respectfully, and responded to effectively and properly—in accordance with the halachah and informed by the best expert resources contemporarily available—communal integrity and respect will be restored.

The problem with sweeping things under the rug, for whatever reason and for whatever motivation, is that the shmutz remains. Our communal carpet has been soiled for too long. And there's just no more room under it to hide any more of our secrets. It's time to peek under the rug and clean up the mess.

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