SO MANY RULES, PROTECTION SEX AMONG ULTRA

The first time 12-year-old David Framowitz had his genitals fondled by a respected teacher from his yeshiva, he panicked, desperate to flee the parked car in which the man had given him a ride to school. Later, when he told his parents about what had happened, they dismissed his story, unable to fathom that a rabbi could be capable of such behavior. Not wanting "to cause trouble," Framowitz continued to suffer the abuse in silence, until he changed schools two years later. Now 48 and the plaintiff in a civil suit against this rabbi, and the school and camp that employed him, Framowitz has come forward to tell his story. Not surprisingly, reactions to it in the ultra-Orthodox world have hardly been encouraging for other victims.

Last May, New York magazine ran an article about the Framowitz allegations, and while many members of the ultra-Orthodox community expressed their outrage in private conversations, or anonymously on Internet blogs, the communal leadership remained silent. The few rabbis and other leaders who acknowledged the report expressed anger not about the alleged abuse and cover-up, but at those who brought the crimes to light.

That bombshell article (disclosure: I was quoted in it) suggested several reasons why confronting sexual abuse is a particular challenge for ultra-Orthodox Jews: the social stigma associated with being the victim of abuse; the ages-old Jewish prohibition against *mesira*, or "informing" to the secular authorities; and the religious proscriptions against *lashon hara* (gossip) and *chilul Hashem* ("desecrating God's name," which in this context means giving the community a "bad name"). These impediments silence victims and protect perpetrators. Reporter Robert Kolker also speculated that the characteristically restrictive ultra-Orthodox approach to sexuality may foster such abuse through its rigidly enforced sex segregation, strict laws governing physical contact between the sexes (including married couples), and taboo against talking openly ("immodestly") or educating young people about sexuality.

The conjectures in that article proved deeply offensive to many in the *frum* (religious) world. Orthodox advocate Marvin Schick, in his regular advertisement which runs as a paid column in New York's Jewish Week newspaper, accused Kolker of "group libel." In an op-ed article in the same newspaper, Avi Shafran, spokesman for the influential ultra-Orthodox umbrella organization Agudath Israel, offered a counter-argument:

> *A Torah-observant life does not lead to aberrant behavior; it helps prevent it.... That fundamental Jewish truth that human inclinations are harnessed and controlled by Torah-life and Torah-study is self-evident to anyone truly familiar with the Orthodox community. The vast majority of*

SO LITTLE & SUPPRESSION ORTHODOX JEWS

by Hella Winston

its members are caring and responsible people who lead exemplary lives, free in large measure from societal ills like rape, AIDS, prostitution and marital infidelity that affect their less "repressed" neighbors.... To imagine that what has defined traditional Jewish life for millennia is somehow a risk factor for abuse is to turn all logic and experience on their heads. The true risk factors, as mental health professionals attest, are things like absent parents, alcohol and drug abuse, lack of support systems and the touting of a Woody Allenesque "the heart wants what it wants" mindset, all considerably underrepresented in the Orthodox community. If any environment can reasonably be imagined to foster the bane of child abuse, it is the charged atmosphere of MTV, R-rated movies, contemporary advertising and uncontrolled Internet usage, not the universe of Jewish values.

There is no doubt that the vast majority of Orthodox Jews are caring and responsible individuals, and that Judaism stresses ethical conduct. Further, because the reasons for pedophilia are not completely understood, to assert a causal relationship between this disorder and the strict regulation of sexuality is problematic, just as inaccurate as blaming pedophilia on MTV or Woody Allen. However, many interviews I have conducted over three years with people intimately familiar with ultra-Orthodox life—including therapists, social workers, physicians, educators and community members themselves—suggest that some aspects of today's stringent ultra-Orthodox approach to sexuality, intended to promote marriage, procreation and a strong family life, can also (unintentionally) create conditions conducive to sexual abuse.

The ultra-Orthodox world consists of both Hasidic and non-Hasidic Jews. While there are important differences between these groups, and within the myriad communities that comprise them, they share a punctilious observance

How secular influences are demonized.
From a flyer found posted in Williamsburg, NY.

and interpretation of Jewish law, and strict boundaries between themselves and what they see as a corrupt—and corrupting—"secular" society. Though the Hasidim tend to promote an even greater separation from the surrounding culture than their non-Hasidic counterparts, both groups generally prohibit watching television, movies or sports; reading secular books, magazines or newspapers; using the Internet (except for business purposes); socializing with outsiders; and getting a secular education. These constraints are intended to protect religious integrity and help ensure the perpetuation of a way of life by staving off assimilation.

These communities—concentrated primarily in parts of New York and New Jersey—also enforce rigid gender roles, derived from a belief in the essential difference between men and women. Rules about "modesty" in dress and behavior also justify sex segregation in almost every area of social

בס"ד

Great News!

Aprons

Dear sister,

Our hearts are filled with pain & anguish as we try to find more zechusem during these trying times. Our gedolim have stressed the importance of protecting our families from outside influences. Unfortunately this not only effects us when we are outdoors, but also inside our yiddishe homes when we are confronted with our cleaning help dressed in a manor that is far from appropriate.

Thus, in response to this pressing need, a group of n'shei chayil in England have come up with the perfect solution. a neat, professional, comfortable and very flattering apron. to be worn as a uniform by all cleaning women when they enter your front door. These uniforms, which have been especially designed for this purpose, can be kept in your home, or offered to your cleaning help as a gift, to be worn as a badge of honor. In fact, if most of the local cleaning ladies are offered these uniforms at the same time, they will consider themselves part of an exclusive club, just like higher-class nannies or live-ins.

An additional benefit that the cleaning ladies will have is that they will be able to keep their own clothes cleaner & free of bleach stains etc. thereby protecting their own clothes and, the kedusha of our homes with one step.

Now, for limited time, lshaim mitzva, these uniforms will be available to the heimishe community for a very low price,

wholesale price is $15 but now L'shem Mitzvah we will be selling them for $8. far less than the wholesale cost. In Monsey, groups of high school girls will be selling these uniforms door to door, in order to make them available to everyone. Thus, hopefully we can guard Kedushas Yisroel by protecting our precious families from seeing these women dressed in provocative, pritzusdig, clothing.

In the merit of this great mitzvah,
may we merit the Geulah Sheleimah, speedily, in our days.

Detail from a flyer distributed recently by a women's group in Kiryas Joel.

life, including education, employment and family relations. Women generally have primary responsibility for the "private" realm of home and family, and some public charity efforts, while men—who, unlike women, are obligated to engage in religious learning—occupy public positions of leadership and power in the community.

A fierce commitment to sex segregation has emerged in the "rules" issued recently by the leadership of the Hasidic enclave of New Square, in New York's Rockland County, purportedly to ensure the "modesty, holiness and pureness" of this "holy shtetl." In this community of approximately 7000 people, about 30 miles north of Manhattan, Yiddish signs instruct women and men to use opposite sides of the street, to prevent them from walking or talking together in public. In addition, women in New Square are urged never to sit in the front seat of a car (as passengers only; women there and in several other Hasidic communities are not allowed to drive); not to congregate in middle of the street or talk loudly in public, especially at times when boys and men come home at the end of the day; not to sit or stand near the entrances of the school or their own housing complexes, since that might force men to pass by them too closely. The rules also prohibit girls from riding bikes or "dancing" on a trampoline, unless it is surrounded by an actual *mechitza* (a wall separating women from men in synagogue and mixed social events). Other regulations warn against women wearing transparent hosiery, dying their eyelashes and sporting long wigs and housecoats outside the home.

Most of these regulations deal with control of women's bodies and their mobility, but they also imply that "immodest" women have the power to defile the entire community. In fact, ultra-Orthodox ideology places most of the burden for thwarting male sexual desire on women, who are to blame if male desire is incited.

In the upstate New York Satmar Hasidic community of Kiryas Joel, several women told me that they had received letters and visits from members of self-appointed community watchdog groups (*meshmeris hatznius*—"guardians of modesty") because they were seen to be violating communal standards. One woman was targeted for wearing a skirt that was "a few inches above regulation" (about three inches above the ankle is the custom), while another was approached because she and her husband often invited divorced men to her home for Shabbos, something the watchdogs apparently considered inappropriate mixing of the sexes; eventually both of these women moved with their families out of the community. This past August in Kiryas Joel, a flyer was posted publicly referring to one married woman by name and labeling her a "stinking carcass" and a "sinner" who must "abscond from" this "holy shtetl." No resident I spoke to could confirm this woman's sin, other than to mention that she dressed attractively and that she and her husband often invited other young couples to their home to socialize.

Certainly New Square and Kiryas Joel are among the most extreme ultra-Orthodox communities; in more "modern" (and not exclusively Hasidic) neighborhoods, many ultra-Orthodox women do drive, and there are no directives ordering women and men to walk on different sides of the street. Nonetheless, throughout the ultra-Orthodox world schools are sex-segregated, and social contact with non-family members of the opposite sex, let alone casual dating, are generally prohibited. In this environment, all-male yeshivas can become breeding grounds for behavior that borders on—and sometimes crosses over into—sexual abuse. In an email to me, one Hasidic man I know personally explained how this can happen:

> *The atmosphere of sexual repression in yeshivas (at least the kind of yeshivas I'm directly familiar with) contributes to many sexual perversions in people not otherwise inclined to behave that way. I'm not only talking about the rampant gay sexual activity ("rampant" as in relative to what I would expect; I don't know if it's rampant relative to a similar secular environment), but also pressuring younger boys into*

acquiescing to certain acts by the older boys, offering payments—or certain electronic goods in lieu of payments—for outright molestation, and sometimes even rape. The vicious cycle is sometimes continued by newlywed young men coming back for their favorite "pets" even after they have a chance for something different (either because they are gay, or because they feel more of an emotional connection to their friends than they do to their wives). Even without the above, the outsized emphasis put—both explicitly and implicitly—on the sin of masturbation, combined with the extreme sexual repression, leaves many detrimental affects [sic] on most going through the system. Now combine all of the above with the fact that many people in positions of authority over young boys and teenagers are young men not yet mature enough to have acquired a healthy attitude toward sex after the perverse environment in yeshiva.

While this man stressed that the abusive behavior he described is by no means a universal feature of yeshiva life, his overall assessment of the environment, and its potential impact on students, was echoed by other people I have spoken to at length. A married Hasidic woman with whom I communicated online wrote "Everyone knows *frum* boys fuck around with each other in yeshiva, *mikvah* (the ritual bath). Because they are told DON'T EVER look at a girl...Blah Blah Blah.... They get married but still think of gay sex once in a while"—even though male homosexual sex is forbidden by the Torah. These observations were confirmed by a sex therapist working with ultra-Orthodox clients, who spoke to me on condition of anonymity because of her sensitive therapeutic role. She likened the situation in all-male yeshivas to that of prisons, or the military. "It's the same thing. People are sexual and it gets acted out." In fact, several men told me that sexually abusive teachers would often target boys they knew were already "sinning" by experimenting sexually with their peers, as a way to ensure their silence about the teacher's abusive behavior. Further, my own research revealed that many Hasidic boys were groped or fondled in the ritual bath (*mikvah*), something that has been the subject of recent discussion on blogs like *failedmessiah.typepad.com* and *jewishsurvivors.blogspot.com*.

Some women also reported same-sex activity in all-female seminaries; notably, the women tended not to experience these relationships as hierarchical or abusive, but more playful or even loving. This may have to do with the fact that there is no explicit Jewish religious prohibition against female homosexual acts, and thus perhaps less guilt, shame and coercion surrounding such encounters. The sex therapist noted that the prohibition against male masturbation ("spilling seed") can exacerbate problems for boys—at least those who take it seriously. Without any outlet for their normal sexual urges—one man told me that he and his classmates were instructed not to touch their penises even while urinating, lest they accidentally get aroused—particularly at a time when those urges are strongest, boys may act out sexually in ways they otherwise would not if other options were not forbidden.

Young people growing up in ultra-Orthodox communities generally receive no formal education about sex. All of the Hasidic men I spoke with told me that in their schools, boys skip the sections of the Talmud that deal with sexual matters. While their non-Hasidic ultra-Orthodox counterparts apparently do study this material, they do so in a very technical manner, focusing, for example, on laws relating to sexual relations in marriage, or on menstruation.

Sanctioned sex education generally occurs only in the weeks before one's wedding, typically an arranged marriage. One man summarized for me the session with his "sex rabbi" this way: "He told me to do a little kissy, kissy, touch her here and there, and then put it in." A Hasidic woman described being on the receiving end of such advice: "My husband had no idea what he was doing," she told me. "It hurt and was humiliating."

WHY THE SILENCE? FEAR OF BRINGING SHAME ON THE FAMILY KEEPS PEOPLE FROM REPORTING ABUSE AND PROSECUTING ABUSERS.

People in the secular world are hardly immune to such experiences. However, a taboo against talking about sexuality can do more than predict awkward wedding nights; it can also foster a profound sense of shame around sexuality, and about the body and its functions. Many Hasidim told me that they had never even learned the words for genitals, but were taught to use euphemisms instead; for men, for example, "the organ of the *bris*." With no vocabulary—let alone permission—to discuss matters of a sexual nature openly, people who have been sexually abused often have trouble communicating, or even understanding, what has happened to them. A social worked illustrated this quite strikingly when she described to me an interview she conducted with an 18-year-old Hasidic victim who had been molested: lacking the words for parts of his own body, the young man had to use gestures to indicate what happened to him. Even for people who are able to speak about such experiences, there is often an inordinate amount of shame involved in the disclosure. One woman recounted her parents' reaction to her revelation that she had been repeatedly raped by her brother:

[You] know damn well that anything sexual is not discussed in a frum household. My mom and dad, they moved on, dismissed it like it never happened. [My mother] does not know that such actions screw you for life. She is in denial. I don't know if it's only my parents or all frum parents. My father, after he was told, did mention he wants to kill my brother, that's all. I was told [by a non-family member] to buy a book and read it, regarding incest. On my wedding day, my father found it and was so upset that I was reading such a sexual book. Oh, come on, it's ok for your fucking son to fuck me, but it ain't ok to heal through reading such a book.

One highly regarded Manhattan psychiatrist, who treats many ultra-Orthodox patients and who spoke on condition of anonymity in order not to compromise his therapeutic relationships, told me he had noted a good deal of what he called "casual incest"—sexual activity between siblings—among his patients. He attributed this to the fact that boys reaching puberty are denied what would be considered healthy contact with females apart from close relatives and, with masturbation considered sinful, end up acting out sexually with whomever was available.

Of course, no one suggests that there are more abusers in the ultra-Orthodox world than in the general population. Research by psychologist Dr. Michelle Friedman, appearing last summer in the annual student journal of Yeshiva Chovevei Torah, Milin Havivin, found that Orthodox girls and teens report rates of sexual abuse similar to that of their secular counterparts. The main difference is that, for a variety of reasons, within the ultra-Orthodox world abuse if it does occur is more likely to go unchecked, allowing abusers to remain in business longer, creating more victims.

Why the silence? Bringing shame on one's family is a significant obstacle to reporting abuse and prosecuting abusers. Because most marriages are arranged on the basis of individual and familial reputation, public knowledge that a person has been a victim of abuse severely compromises his or her options for making a "good match." The stigma of abuse taints not only the victim but siblings and other relatives as well. As a result, those who have been abused (and their families) have a tremendous incentive to keep the abuse a secret. One woman told me that her father, learning that she had been raped by a respected member of the community, threatened to burn her with a hot pan if she ever told anyone in the community about it; she was 10 years old at the time.

Another serious impediment to rooting out abuse is the communal prohibition against *mesira*, betraying the community to outside authorities. Once punishable by death, *mesira* is still taken seriously, discouraging most people from reporting abuse to the police. When I asked her whether she had ever considered going to the police, one woman who was molested replied, "I don't think so! It does not work like that in the frum world. You shall not be a *moser*, which means no telling on others; suffer in silence." This attitude is pervasive, despite a recent ruling by Rabbi Yosef Shalom Elyashiv, a Jerusalem rabbi considered by the ultra-Orthodox to be one of the most respected interpreters of Jewish law. Elyashiv's ruling held that it is permissible to hand over a child abuser to the American police in cases where "It is clear that [the person] has committed a foul deed, and that this [informing] constitutes a sort of repair of the world." However, even in light of this clear ruling, the fear of being branded an informer remains strong, and is often exploited by those in power as a means of silencing victims, protecting the community's "good name"—and protecting the abuser in the process.

Many parents privately express concern about this issue, and claim they would like their leaders to prevent sexual abuse in institutional settings, and to deal with it effectively when it does occur. Most also say, though, that they themselves are unlikely to speak up about their concerns, let alone "inform" to the police on an abuser. Further, most admit that they would not allow one of their own children to marry a known victim of abuse.

While the outside world responds to such reports with shock, there is no denying the role played by the larger society in enabling this state of affairs. In the name of deeply held American commitments to religious freedom, these communities have been allowed to flourish with little outside oversight. A combination of ignorance and nostalgia often makes these very stringently observant and closed communities immune to serious scrutiny by fellow citizens—particularly liberal Jews who may idealize or romanticize this way of life, or politicians who appreciate the fact that ultra-Orthodox leaders can and do deliver votes in a bloc.

Unlike their public-school counterparts, administrators in ultra-Orthodox schools and other non-public schools are not required to run background checks on teachers, and because clergy are exempt from being mandated reporters, ultra-Orthodox teachers (most of whom are rabbis, at least in boys' schools) are not legally required to report suspected cases of abuse. And where distortions of Jewish law and custom may be invoked to prevent people from taking legal action, and educational options are limited, there may be little motivation for self-policing, aside from the obvious: the health and welfare of young people. Instead, this past August, a few months after the original magazine article appeared, the teacher accused of sexual molestation was spotted escorting young campers to a water park in Connecticut, and a reliable source told me that he has since been soliciting parents to sign their children up for a similar outing next summer. At Rosh Hashanah, he was also reportedly asked to blow the shofar in his shul, an honor accorded only the most respected members of the community. One can only imagine how his victims must feel about that. ■

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www.theawarenesscenter.org Offers comprehensive information and Jewish resources on sexual violence, a speakers' bureau and a certification program for Jewish community leaders. In the two weeks following the New York magazine article, The Awareness Center received over 60 calls from (mostly male) survivors who'd never before told anyone they were abused as children.

www.jsafe.org Run by Rabbi Mark Dratch, JSafe is aimed at addressing the issues of domestic violence and child abuse in the Jewish world through newsletters, conferences and comprehensive training for people working in Jewish organizations.

jewishsurvivors.blogspot.com A blog administered by anonymous Jewish survivors of sexual abuse provides general information on childhood sexual abuse, sexual assault and rabbinic misconduct.