

Hiding Sexual Abuse and Rabbi Rosenberg's Big Shofar

Originally Published on Morethodoxy (2012)¹

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The Shocking Nature of Cover-ups

When the [NY Times article](#) on sexual abuse in the Hasidic Community came out last week, I thought to myself, “I already know what this is going to say; I can’t imagine this will shock me.” Sadly, I was mistaken.

The fact that sex abuse occurs in the frum community should not come as a shock – according to experts, statistics for sexual abuse in this community is about the same as other communities. For those familiar with famous cases like that of the Modern Orthodox youth director [Baruch Lanner](#) or the Hareidi school teacher [Yehuda Kolko](#), the reality that such abuse can be protracted and that the perpetrator can torment a great number of victims is well known. Even the fact that blind eyes are turned or that communal authorities refuse to believe the testimony of witnesses is par for the course for anyone who follows [these stories](#). There was even a documentary called [Standing Silent](#) which follows the story of sex-abuse survivors from the Baltimore area.

Most disturbing in the *Times* article was the aggressive response by the community and the rabbinic establishment to parents of victims, and even to the victims

¹ Morethodoxy shut down, so I am posting my previously published articles as PDFs here. They have not been revised.

themselves, if they expressed desire to report the incidents to the police: parents were shunned, children expelled from school, and retaliatory threats were made against parents if they did not leave town with their children.

As if this weren't bad enough, the next day the *Times* featured [another article](#) detailing an ostensibly unofficial agreement between the H̄asidic community and district attorney Charles Hynes. According to this report, the local rabbis get to hear the reports first and decide which ones to pursue and which ones not to pursue. The arrangement that the rabbis control the information about sex offenders is, unfortunately, not unique to the H̄asidim in Brooklyn. A few months ago, the *Jewish Week* [reported](#) a similar understanding in the H̄areidi community in Lakewood, wherein a tribunal of rabbis apparently investigates on its own, and threats of communal ostracism are levied against any parent wishing to approach the police.

This was the shocking part. Even for those of us who feel that we “already know” about the blight of child molestation in the Orthodox world, it is still jarring to read about a community that seems to stigmatize going to the authorities more than committing sexual abuse itself. I cannot imagine that the H̄asidim or the H̄areidim care about the welfare of their children any less than other communities. Nor can I imagine that the Ultra-Orthodox rabbinic establishment looks kindly on sexual abuse of girls and boys or that they are not horrified by the prospect of pedophiles in their midst.

So why aren't they reporting it?

Apologetic Defenses

Defenses have been proffered. Some have invoked the prohibition of *mesirah*, turning a Jew in to the Gentile authorities. But this prohibition only applies when the Gentile and Jewish communities are in an antagonistic relationship and where there is the possibility of Jews successfully policing their own independent communities. It is totally irrelevant to the realities of child sexual abuse in modern American society, where the court and police system are necessary in order to protect the community, and the governmental authorities are a resource, not a threat, to our community.

Others have warned that the consequences of false reporting are devastating to the person accused. Certainly, false reports must be avoided, and, hopefully, the police and the justice system can weed out most of the bogus reports before an innocent person's reputation is shot. However, it may be true that some false reports reach a stage where an innocent person is publicly accused and his or her life is shattered. Nevertheless, this is a risk any criminal justice system must take. The alternative needs to be kept in mind as well: for every sex offender not reported, tens if not hundreds of innocent lives are shattered.

Perhaps the most prevalent defense nowadays is the recourse made to the concept of *hillul hashem*, desecrating God's name. The claim has been that if the existence of sexual abuse in religious Jewish communities became public, the humiliation would desecrate God's name. I cannot accept this argument as it is a distortion and misapplication of the concept of *hillul ha-shem*. There is no question that it is the child molesters that have desecrated God's name, not the parents that report the

crime and try to protect their children and other children who will be the perpetrator's next victims.

What weighs on me more heavily is whether the Ultra-Orthodox community itself truly believes this explanation. These scandals have been breaking one after the other for more than a decade – if there was ever any real possibility of keeping things hush-hush, it has long since passed. And yet, the rabbinic establishment in these communities still does not encourage reporting. Additionally, it is very hard for me to believe that the threat of bad press for the community could outweigh the protection of one's children from sexual predators.

There appears to be a rather different consideration at work here.

Extreme Insularity – The Spartan Phalanx at Work

The Ultra-Orthodox communities are characterized by an extreme insularity. These communities view the secular world as a threat to their lifestyle, and much of their sociology is built around protecting themselves from the pernicious influence of the outside world. Like the Spartans with their phalanx formation, the Ultra-Orthodox believe that any chink in their armor of insulation could lead to the collapse of the troops.

If the rabbinic establishment in these communities were to admit that their constituents needed police involvement, and that the parents and victims should trust the secular authorities in this matter, a positive relationship could evolve between the Ultra-Orthodox community and the very authorities that they have long treated with suspicion. Conceivably, it may be difficult to navigate a situation

where Gentile police officers, judges and court psychologists are protecting children from child-molesters who are themselves religious Jews. In the eyes of the rabbinic establishment, there is potential for a cascading effect.

As a result, the rabbis try to control the situation on their own, but they are not trained or equipped to do so. It seems to me that the mythical allure of the secular world the Ultra-Orthodox are battling has become more than just counterproductive; it has paralyzed the ability of the rabbinic leadership to protect its own constituency. Tragically, the young victims and their families will continue to pay the price until a different attitude towards the government and the general culture can be cultivated.

Glimmers of Hope

There were some faint glimmers of hope in the grim *Times* report. There was the Chabad *beit din* that ruled that one is required to report any evidence of abuse to the police. There was the young Rabbi Tzvi Gluck who has begun to act as a liaison between victims of sexual abuse and the Brooklyn district attorney's office.

Rabbi Nuchem Rosenberg

What stood out most to me was the work of Rabbi Nuchem Rosenberg, an eccentric Satmar rabbi from Williamsburg, is almost single-handedly battling to encourage the reporting of child molesters to the police in his community. R. Rosenberg is a scholar, author of the book *Yatza Eish me-Heshbon*, and an expert on the laws of *miqvaot* (ritual baths), who consults all over the world. Since R. Rosenberg is also a business man and entrepreneur, he takes no fee for this work.

Most importantly for this piece, R. Rosenberg is anything but insular. I know this because I know him personally; he was my teacher at YCT Rabbinical School.

When a number of us wanted to learn the laws of miqvah, our Rosh ha-Yeshiva, R. Dov Linzer, thought it would be best if we studied with someone who had practical experience constructing miqvaot. The fact that a Satmar rabbi was willing to teach in a Modern Orthodox rabbinical school was itself unusual; he also agreed to let women sit in on the class, something virtually unheard of in his community.

Until I read this *Times* article, I was unaware that R. Rosenberg is instrumental in the struggle to change the cultural attitudes surrounding child molestation in the Hasidic world. While the ostensibly more modern Agudath Israel issues a [statement](#) that references obtaining rabbinic permission to report (although, to be fair, they do encourage reporting in clear cases of sexual abuse), R. Rosenberg's urgent push to report potential abuse cases is a breath of fresh air. With a hotline and a [website](#) in English, Yiddish and Hebrew, R. Rosenberg strongly encourages parents to report abuse *directly* to the police.

Blowing his Big Shofar

Though R. Rosenberg has been vilified by fellow members of Satmer for his activism, this does not appear to be dampening his resolve. This is unsurprising, as from the many anecdotes he told us about his work in the summer of 2004, resolve is clearly one of his chief qualities. One anecdote in particular stands out in my memory, as it does for my colleague Rabbi Jason Herman, who was one of the students and wrote about it in his [blog](#).

Rabbi Rosenberg described a dispute with a local rabbi about the state of the local *miqvah*. When the rabbi would not agree to repair the situation, Rabbi Rosenberg pressured him: "I have a big Shofar, and if you don't fix the problem I will blow it and tell everybody." At the time, I was unsure about the type of personality that felt it was his business to publicly announce *miqvah* problems to the detriment of the local rabbi. Now, however, in light of his outspokenness against pedophilia in the Ḥasidic community, I say thank God he has a big shofar, and I hope he keeps using it.

What can be done?

The question remains: For those of us who are not part of the Ultra-Orthodox communities, how can we help? I would also like to blow my shofar, but I fear I stand too far away from my Ḥasidic and Ḥareidi brothers and sisters for them to hear me, and I assume that many of the people reading this feel the same way.

But we cannot stand idly by, and perhaps we are not entirely powerless.

We must support Rabbi Rosenberg and others like him in the good work they are already doing. We must make clear that the Modern Orthodox rabbinate and community members are interested in helping the victims; whether this means helping them find counseling, taking their kids into our schools, or just giving them a safe space to discuss their issues and strategize about their future. We need to stand shoulder to shoulder with Rabbi Rosenberg and blow our shofars too. After all, we are our brothers' keepers.