

ARE JEWISH COMMUNITY newspapers timorous lap dogs sitting pert and pretty in a world of corruption, abuse of power, and conflicts of interest? The answer is not self-evident. Five years ago, *The Jewish Week of New York*, my former employer, courageously exposed Rabbi Baruch Lanner, a prominent Orthodox rabbi who for decades sexually harassed vulnerable young people under his charge. The article, by editor Gary Rosenblatt, was meticulously researched, filled with the kind of detail that inspires credibility and so multiply sourced as to bury Lanner under a mountain of evidence. The paper also highlighted the moral failure of prominent Orthodox leaders who closed their eyes and ears to victims when allegations of Lanner's conduct were brought to their attention — then stood its ground against a torrent of abuse and boycott threats.

With Lanner's conviction in a court of law and important reforms at the Orthodox Union (which employed Lanner), supporters of independent journalism dared hope the story would mark a breakthrough for the profession; no longer would readers be treated like children who could not be exposed to the world's harsh truths.

But five years later such expectations appear misplaced. Witness this winter and spring's revelations regarding Washington lobbyist Jack Abramoff, the self-proclaimed traditionally observant Jew, owner of two Washington kosher restaurants, and crony to House Majority Leader Tom DeLay. Abramoff not only appears to have subverted congressional ethics rules by sponsoring or helping shadowy off-shore entities sponsor Delay junkets to Scotland, Russia, and the Pacific Northern Mariana Islands, but a cascade of follow-up stories also revealed that:

- Abramoff funded a yeshiva day school he headed with millions of dollars fraudulently gouged from three American Indian tribes and funneled through an Abramoff-controlled foundation purportedly devoted to "needy and deserving" inner city youth sports programs. Abramoff convinced the tribes their contributions were crucial to ensuring support from DeLay and other congressional leaders for their casino gambling interests.
- When one tribe said it had no more

money to pay Abramoff for lobbying, Abramoff came up with a plan to provide term life insurance to tribal elders, who would make the yeshiva their beneficiary. The school would then pay Abramoff's lobbying fees.

- More than \$140,000 from Abramoff's inner city youth sports foundation went to the West Bank, where it was used by a Jewish settler to mobilize against the Palestinian uprising.

None of this was broken by a Jewish media outlet — though some of it was shockingly easy to find. The expenditures of Abramoff's frequently cited Capital Athletic Foundation, for example, are publicly available. After the initial story in a February 2004 *Washington Post* about such a prominent Jewish figure, why did no Jewish outlet follow up? Was anyone reading?

Rightwing culture warrior Rabbi Daniel Lapin introduced DeLay and Abramoff when Abramoff was both board chairman of Lapin's group Toward Tradition — which decries what it terms the leading role of Jews in American cultural decadence — and a key lobbyist for liquor and gambling interests. And in 1996 the Marianas government — an Abramoff client — awarded a \$1.2 million no-bid contract to Rabbi David Lapin, Daniel Lapin's brother, to promote "ethics in government." A recent government audit was unable to determine what work David Lapin performed. *The New York Times* — not any Jewish paper — provided this Jewish story, too.

The possible reasons for such a lack of investigative curiosity are many: the old *shonkeh fur the goyim* defensive crouch is one reason that quickly comes to mind. But I suspect many Jewish news outlets simply do not approach their profession with the idea that investigative journalism is part of their brief.

Investigative journalism requires a willingness to commit staff to time-consuming research and to support them with investigative tools and financial resources. But before anything else, Jewish papers must crave credibility with a fierceness that puts first their readers' right to know about their community. Only then will they lift themselves out of their current lap dog-like status.

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