

Rabbi Sexual Misconduct: Crying Out for a Communal Response

BY ARTHUR GROSS SCHAEFER

Rabbinic Sexual Abuse: The exercise by rabbis of their trusted position to exploit others by means of sexual activity or suggestion. That these unwelcomed sexual behaviors are used to degrade, humiliate, control, hurt, and otherwise misuse another. And, that coercion, secrecy, and betrayal often play into this abuse.

Few of us would have predicated the continuing interest and publicity surrounding clergy sexual boundary violations in general and rabbinic sexual misconduct in particular. While many of us read *The Scarlet Letter* in high school, there were virtually no serious studies or discussions focused on clergy sexual misconduct until just a few years ago. Usually, this topic has been greeted with silence and denial. With the exception of a few recent

articles, there has been little written about rabbinic sexual abuse. And yet, an unpublished survey of ministers undertaken in 1984 suggests that over 38.6% of those surveyed admitted having sexual contact with church members and 12.7% had intercourse. Moreover, the survey revealed that 76.5% of the ministers acknowledged knowing other ministers who had intercourse with a congregant.

While we have no surveys targeting the rabbinic community, most people working in this area believe that an examination of rabbis would reveal similar numbers to those ministers. This belief that the research found in the non-Jewish community appropriately approximates the rabbinic community is bolstered by the results in a recent survey involving women rabbis. This study found that 73% of the women rabbis who responded had experienced sexual harassment. In a similar survey conducted by the United

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Methodist Church in 1990, 77% of the clergywomen indicated encounters of sexual harassment in the church. If these limited statistics are to be believed, clergy and rabbi sexual abuse are certainly not a recent phenomenon. Why then are these surveys, books, articles, and the public's attention only now starting to be directed to this area?

An Emerging Discussion

Certainly some credit for the attention is due, in part, to the national publicity regarding sexual harassment from Anita Hill's allegations, the Tailhook scandal, hearings involving Senator Packwood, and the recent scandals involving the president of the United States. Moreover, the tabloid coverage involving television evangelists and the many reports of respected clergy having extra-marital affairs has certainly spotlighted clergy sexual misconduct. Beyond this publicity and the newspapers' willingness to highlight allegations involving rabbis, the increasing litigious nature of our society encourages plaintiffs to seek large awards (federal law provides up to \$300,000 in damages plus punitive damages in cases of sexual harassment). Laity and insurance companies are beginning to demand that clergy begin discussing this subject and the need to take preventive actions.

In addition to the increasing publicity and attempts to reduce legal exposure, discussions of sexual abuse have been heightened by three other trends in our society. First, the increasing role of women as leaders and opinion makers allows for the reflection

of how the dominant male society kept its power. In that perception, sexual abuse is viewed as a tool of domination and an exercise of power. Accordingly, heightened sensitivity to sexual abuse is part of the broader openness of our society to understanding the expanding role of women.

Secondly, our society has few heroes and seems almost obsessed with tearing down those in leadership roles. While some congregants place rabbis on a pedestal, there seems to be a growing number who are eager to knock rabbis down by pointing to this type of abuse.

Finally, rabbis themselves are beginning to articulate the unending pressures, conflicting expectations, and loneliness that they face. In these discussions, sexual abuse is brought up as a symptom of the malaise facing our spiritual leaders. These factors, as well as others, are all combining to raise the topic of rabbinic sexual misconduct on the agenda of the Jewish community.

Silence Has Not Served Us Well

Sadly, our community's reactions up to this point have been often based on keeping things quiet in an attempt to do "damage control." Fear of lawsuits and bad publicity have dictated an atmosphere of hushed voices and outrage against those who dare to break ranks by speaking out. However, this conspiracy of silence does not serve our community well.

Silence allows the victim to become further victimized by the Jewish community. Victims tell me that no one

really wants to listen to their story—not the board of directors, nor rabbinic colleagues, nor the Jewish community. No one wants to hear that a beloved clergy person has acted inappropriately. Other rabbis, either within the institution or outside, keep their distance and their mouths closed. And other institutional members usually shun, and begin blaming, the victim. As in many rape cases, it is the victim's character that is quickly put on trial—to both undermine the credibility of the allegations and divert attention from the acts of the offender. The victim becomes victimized again and again as his/her reality is denied. This sense of isolation and denial can lead to some of the injured blaming themselves. Through the powerful tool of silence, we continue the pain and abuse of the victims.

Silence may also encourage legal action against rabbis and our institutions. Unlike the heroine in *The Scarlet Letter*, who buried the memory of her affair deep within her soul, today's victims are demanding that their stories be heard. Many survivors of clergy abuse have said that they began legal action only as a last resort when the religious institutions refused to seriously investigate their allegations.

Moreover, as rabbinic colleagues and lay leaders keep the “secret,” the abusing rabbi can continue the violation either in the existing congregation or at the next with the belief that his actions will be kept a “family secret.” In this way, colleagues, lay leadership, and religious institutions become part of the conspiracy which allows the abusive activity to con-

tinue. As Reverend Marie Fortune of the Center for the Prevention of Sexual and Domestic Violence teaches, when one remains a bystander in the area of clergy sexual misconduct, one stands with the perpetrator and allows the abuse to continue. Our religious and lay leaders can no longer be bystanders to victimization within our community.

Silence has allowed us to breach our communal obligation to insure that our institutions are safe environments and that our religious leaders adhere to high standards of moral conduct. Rabbis do represent our community and our Jewish tradition. Their actions, in the face of our silence, reflect on all of us.

Needed: A Comprehensive Response

It is time that we have more consistency and integrity by dealing with these unpleasant issues in an open and honest manner. We are compelled to place the topic of rabbinic sexual misconduct on the Jewish community agenda. While we trust our rabbinic organizations and seminaries to train and supervise our rabbis, we must also make them accountable to the general community. We expect rabbis to adopt an ethical duty to disclose information of abuse perpetrated by colleagues and that allegations and rehabilitation procedures become increasingly public. Rabbinic organizations should draft guidelines that clearly spell out how complaints are filed, investigated, and adjudicated. There should be rabbis specially trained to investigate and adjudicate allegations.

We need to learn from our sources and develop a process for rehabilitation that incorporates concepts of *teshuvah* (repentance) such as reaching out to those who were harmed. In conversations with survivors of clergy sexual abuse, I would always ask them what they require to help facilitate their healing. Usually, they would talk about the continuing pain from the silence of the offending clergy. They want to know that the offending clergy acknowledged and “named” the abuse and truly felt remorse. While I recognize the inherent legal and emotional problems involved, our tradition of *teshuvah* does inform us of the need to face those (in person or in writing) that we have wronged, as they deem appropriate, to help in their healing process.

And even then, we need to acknowledge that the position of rabbi is not a right but an honor which we bestow. Reverend Fortune asserts that while confession and/or acknowledgment of responsibility is an important first step, it should not be assumed that full restoration to pastoral ministry is guaranteed. Rabbi Patricia Karlin-Neumann argues that a *bet din*, a rabbinical court, must be convened to determine whether an offending rabbi who has gone through *teshuvah* can return to perform pastoral duties, and if so, in what contexts.

The Role of a Caring Community

As a caring community, we are challenged to reach out to the victims of abuse. We should appreciate that

survivors of rabbi sexual boundary violations have experienced significant and long lasting trauma. Similar to victims of sexual abuse by a therapist, victims of clergy sexual misconduct experience a deception of a trusted relationship.

Moreover, when sexual exploitation is perpetrated by God’s emissary, one also suffers spiritual abuse, which leaves one feeling totally alone and forsaken. As Rabbi Karen Fox, who is also a family counselor, noted, “shame permeates their feelings about the temple, the rabbi, things Jewish.” The synagogue becomes a dangerous place and rabbis becomes untrustworthy. Quite often, victims feel that they must leave their religious community. For them, going to a synagogue or talking to a rabbi may forever be tainted by their experience. The Jewish community can reach out through seminars and programs designed for healing.

The Jewish community can also help do preventive work by insisting on continual education programs in our seminaries and for our rabbis. Like therapists, who are often required to distribute to clients pamphlets regarding sexual misconduct in the therapeutic relationship, we also can create and disseminate similar materials that provide warning signs, options for help and reporting such abuse.

We must make it clear that professional rabbinic conduct never includes sex. We must not be afraid to articulate that it is wrong for a rabbi to have sexual relations with a congregant. The rabbi is the professional who is

expected to maintain the boundary between appropriate and inappropriate conduct. The rabbi must recognize and take responsibility for being in the dominant power position and act responsibly. There is no such thing as a freely "consenting adult" in this type of a situation; it is always the clergy person's responsibility to set and keep boundaries. We should clearly state that it is the duty of the rabbi to stop all sexual behavior with congregants whether it is wanted or not.

Institutional and Communal Responses

Finally, the Jewish community should more fully understand that abuse in a congregation or any other Jewish institution must be dealt with as a significant disturbance to that institution. Institutions are like families, and they, too, require assistance in recovering from a severe shock to their

system. Special training needs to be developed for interim rabbis and rabbis taking over a pulpit or community position that has been vacated by a rabbi accused of sexual abuse. Public and private meetings with trained facilitators should be held to allow members of the community to explore their feelings of confusion in a safe and nourishing environment.

Unless the Jewish community chooses to break the silence, sexual misconduct by our rabbis will effectively be condoned by our inaction. The goal of responding to rabbi sexual misconduct is not to punish or to brand, but rather to protect and help insure healthy relationships with our spiritual leaders. We must recognize that when a rabbi violates a boundary, we are all diminished. When we help to create safe and nourishing leaders and environments, we are all enriched.