It Takes a Village: Communal Guidance from an Orthodox Criminologist



What does Dr. Guila Benchimol, an Orthodox criminologist, want you to know about abuse in the Jewish community? In this guest post, Dr. Benchimol shares her advice for the Jewish community. Read on for her incisive thoughts on how we can make the world a safer place.

"What's a nice, *frum* teacher like you doing becoming a criminologist?" That was the reaction I got when I left my career of over 10 years in Jewish education to study criminology. Starting my undergraduate studies at the age of 29, I had no clue where this path would lead—but I did not think my future work would focus on the Jewish community. What I discovered, however, was that my studies allowed me to view communal issues through a new lens.

In 2011, right before I was to begin a Master's program, Leiby Kletzky z"l was murdered. As a human, Jew, mother, educator, and member of the Orthodox community, I could not stop thinking about the case. I noticed that people commenting on the stories reported on *frum* media sites were raising conversations about sexual abuse, mental health, communal problems, and more—issues that were not generally discussed in public. They also debated whether to report abuse to law enforcement or rabbis and how to bring about communal change.

As I studied that case for two years and what it allowed the community to discuss, I learned about how other insular communities respond to crimes committed within. I began working and volunteering in my newfound field—both in and outside the Jewish community—in the areas of white collar crime, domestic violence and homicide, and sexual abuse. For my doctorate, I studied how victims and survivors of sexual violence—both in and outside of religious communities—become anti-sexual violence advocates and activists. I wanted to center the voices of survivors in explaining the challenging path some take from silence to voice and capture the effects of primary and secondary victimization on their lives, on their decisions to become advocates and activists, and on their identities.

Increasingly, I was called upon to educate Jewish and other faith leaders and professionals, to consult, and to write about abuse in our communities. That's why when a relative asked if I really thought we had a problem with abuse in the *frum* community, I responded with a resounding yes. I knew—because I carried the stories of my students, campers, youth organization participants, community members, and their families who trusted me. I also carried my own experiences and the stories I had been exposed to through my work that my studies had given me the tools to name and understand. I watched with interest as victims and survivors began to tell their stories publicly and as Jewish media began to more frequently report on rabbis and others who have abused.

Here's what I can offer from my time doing this work:

- **Public, frank, and regular conversations about sexual abuse and domestic violence in our communities, shuls, schools, camps, homes, and other spaces is a first step.** Abuse is shrouded in darkness because we have covered it up with our silence. Silence is a perpetrator's weapon that we should not help them wield. We can't be afraid to talk about a reality that exists in every community, including ours. And we shouldn't wait to have these conversations until a story makes it into the headlines. Instead, we should talk about the systemic issues that have allowed for abuse in our communities and consider ideas for structural change. Our discussion can include the Torah's obligation to act rather than ignore harm being done to another and the *chillul Hashem* that occurs when we ignore our obligations or enable others to do so. Normalize having these conversations as one act of prevention and intervention. And recognize that survivors are listening to and participating in these conversations—which can validate or harm them—and assessing whether our communities are safe for them.

- **Ensure that your conversations, training, and policy work are guided by experts and informed by survivors.** We need to be aware of what we don't know and call in trained professionals to guide us. Rabbis need to turn—and refer people—to professionals as well. Establish relationships with these professionals before problems arise or escalate. This

includes law enforcement and mental health professionals *as well as* experts in the areas of gender based violence. Professionals can give us the clear language we need to talk about things we may not know how to such as: the continuum of violence, rape myths, coercive control, spiritual abuse, cognitive dissonance, silencing mechanisms, the truth about the low rates of false reports, and more. They can also teach us about bystander intervention, being trauma-informed and survivor-centered, and the right words we must use. Learning this language and these tools will help us have better conversations and make better decisions.Additionally, survivors are the experts of their experiences and hold a wealth of knowledge about victimization and what could have been done differently to prevent their suffering, at the time or in the aftermath. We are whole people who are much more than what may be the worst thing that was done to us. While safeguarding our communities is not a survivor's burden to bear, invite them to partner with you on your change-making efforts should they want to be involved. It is one way to offer survivors the agency that was taken from them when they were victimized.

- **Learn how to respond to disclosures of abuse and know your role.** A survivor's disclosure is a gift they have given you, as well as an opportunity. They have made many considerations in deciding to share with you, which often includes having to disclose to themselves first. Your response impacts their ability to recover or heal, their rate of recovery, and their desire and ability to navigate systems they may turn to after having been victimized. Your job is to listen—not to investigate. Don't revictimize them, which is called secondary victimization and occurs when one responds to survivors' disclosures with a negative reaction, rejection, or stigmatization, such as victim blaming or minimizing the harm. Survivors have repeatedly stressed that the secondary victimization they have experienced by relatives, friends, religious leaders, and others was equal to or worse than the victimization itself.Recognize that survivors often speak up to urge the community to do better so that no one should have to go through what they did. The community should rally around them with support and answer their call with empathy and action. Imagine how it feels to sound the alarm at great risk to yourself and be ignored—or worse, to be shamed and treated as a threat. We cannot teach children and others that it is safe to come forward until we have created communities where they will be safe and supported when they do.

- **Understand the role that gender and power play in abuse cases and in efforts to combat abuse.** Gender plays a key role in victimization, disclosures, and their aftermath. The data on sexual and domestic violence tell us that while people of all genders can be victims and perpetrators, women make up the majority of victims and men are most often the perpetrators of these acts. (This is not to say that all men are perpetrators.) For a long time in *frum* communities, the focus on childhood sexual abuse has been on male child victims. And the community has yet to grapple with the victimization of adults, especially women, that other

Jewish denominations and religious communities have been attempting to address, especially in the wake of #MeToo. Like others, we also still have a long way to go in addressing incest. Adult survivors have told me they feel there is no one that will understand, believe, or sympathize with what was done to them. Women survivors have told me about the particular ways in which they've been blamed and stigmatized and how this has led them to blame themselves. Male survivors reported feeling afraid to come forward because of how they will be labeled and that they found support services lacking. LGBTQ+ victims have spoken to me about how their victimization happened because of their identities. We can't ignore how these are linked to some of the other issues around gender with which the Orthodox community struggles. And as a *frum* woman in this field, I have noticed that these problems extend to who is recognized in our communities as a voice that is allowed to speak on these issues.

- **Know and abide by your legal obligations. And recognize that the criminal justice system is not perfect.** Learn about what you must report and how to do so. Recognize the steps you should take even if you are not a mandated reporter. Support survivors when they decide to report to law enforcement or to testify against their abusers.Understand and respect that not every survivor wants to report or testify for various reasons including because the criminal justice system and the process of reporting can be retraumatizing. A report may not lead to an arrest, an arrest may not lead to prosecution, and survivors know that a conviction is far from guaranteed, especially in historical cases. When a perpetrator is acquitted, the community needs to understand what Dr. Nicole Bedera says: this does not mean that they were falsely accused or that the violence did not occur. Survivors may prefer alternative forms of justice such as restorative or transformative justice or they may not want to do anything at all.

- **To fully address abuse, we need to understand perpetration.** A convicted sexual abuser from a *frum* community once addressed a conference I attended. He spoke about the need to make the years-long impact of abuse explicit to perpetrators. He also claimed that the abuse he engaged in began with sexual experimentation at a young age that his friends grew out of, but he did not. If we aren't willing to acknowledge that sexual experimentation among kids happens or talk to them about their bodies, how can we expect to safeguard them? He reminded me of another offender who spoke about knowing what he was doing was wrong but being too embarrassed to ask for help. Would we be able to divert young people from further offending if we created safe spaces for them to ask for help early on? When youth abuse, what mechanisms are in place to help them find their way? These and the issues below are difficult questions that other communities have been working to answer (see section F).

  Unless incarcerated, people who abuse don't disappear from our communities. The offender at the conference spoke about how his *frum* community 'manages' him, something that has the

> potential for good only if done properly and in consultation with experts. I've seen it missing in places where it is widely known that a community member has abused or upon the release of a convicted individual. While his claim that the rabbis could have done more to stop and scare him sounded like a way to blame others, it highlighted the complex navigation of relationships for individuals that are connected to both offenders and those they have harmed—and their families—something very common in close-knit communities. Unfortunately, community members' sympathies have often been misguidedly extended to offenders when their victims come forward. But communal leaders and those close to offenders can play an important role in getting them to take accountability for their actions and support them as they do.

There has been progress, especially in the areas of policy development, training, and in better responding to current cases. *Frum* communities can learn a lot from other Jewish denominations and religious groups who are trying to reckon publicly and privately with their past failures and in upholding the survivors in their midst because abuse is more than what happens between two individuals. As victim advocate Phil Saviano says in the movie *Spotlight*: "If it takes a village to raise a child, it takes a village to abuse them." Let's strengthen our response to abuses of all kinds, so we can heal our entire village.

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Guila Benchimol, PhD, is the Senior Advisor on Research and Learning with the SRE Network and was one of the key advisors who guided its launch in early 2018. As a researcher and public educator on sexual violence, she has been invited to address Jewish professionals and clergy across Canada and the US, as well as other faith communities and has crafted standards and policies for Jewish workplaces, institutions, and communal spaces.

Guila spent the last year at the OU's Center for Communal Research. She also serves as a Research Associate at the Centre for the Study of Social and Legal Responses to Violence, where she has worked on projects related to homicide and domestic violence deaths and sits on the board of the Survivors Network of those Abused by Priests (SNAP). Her first career as a Jewish educator informed her understanding of the need to address victimization of all kinds in Jewish communities. Guila was previously the Director of Judaic Studies at Tiferes Bais Yaakov where she also taught Tanach to grades 9 through 12 and the Managing Director for NCSY Canada where she founded and directed an international camp for high school girls. Guila holds a PhD in Sociological Criminology and an MA in Criminology and Criminal Justice Policy from the University of Guelph and is also a trained restorative justice facilitator. She lives in Toronto and was raised in the Spanish Moroccan Jewish community there which was built by the families who fled Tangiers.